

## General Synod, Remotely, 23rd - 25th November 2020

For an overview of the Group of Sessions: [Timetable](#)

### Monday 23rd November

In my last report, in February, I boldly asserted that it would be my penultimate report. How wrong I was! Next February might be!

We gathered somewhere, this time, in cyberspace! Most of us met via Zoom while the platform party met in Westminster. The technology generally worked well - no breakout rooms - and given the circumstances we got the hang of it by early Tuesday.

The meeting in September, in Church House, was a limited affair in terms of numbers and business. However, the passage of the measure, and its subsequent approval by Parliament, enabled us to meet in the way we did.

The first hurdle to get through was to approve changes to our standing orders to overcome difficulties in operating in a virtual environment. They had been worded as simply and succinctly as possible to effect the necessary tweaks.

One unintended consequence was that because a Zoom poll was considered to be an electronic poll it would mean votes would be recorded and reported on. As the Zoom poll was designed to be informal it was supposed to reflect a show of hands in the chamber which in normal circumstances would not be recorded. This upset a number of members. We will see if this leads to a change in due course!

This group of session occurs 8 years after one of the darkest days in Synod's history when the Women Bishop's legislation turned into a car crash. Incidentally, it was also on a day when my Solar panels recorded zero.

I was therefore pleased with the presentation of the LLF (Living in Love & Faith) materials and the sensitive way that +Christopher and others led the invitation to engage with the materials over the next year. Sadly the irenic bubble popped in the debate on the Agenda when it appeared that insensitivity to others had led an organisation, run by a member of Synod, to use carefully curated materials from LLF videos to be used and criticised on their website.

The LLF challenge is for all of the church to use the [Pastoral Principles](#) to help the church to grow into a better understanding of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. It is expected that, used appropriately, almost everyone will end up in a different place to where they start from. This needs us to open our minds to what causes us to disagree. This can't be done if we have already alienated those who interpret things differently.

As can be expected the impact of the pandemic featured heavily throughout the three days of Synod. In a wide ranging debate which included a call to the whole church to hold in prayer all those ill, bereaved, unemployed or suffering mentally as a result of the virus, the Synod showed itself in a good way. Importantly, it also included a call to retain the 0.7% Foreign Aid commitment. Sadly, this has since been ignored.

Question Time is always controversial. This is where members get to hold the officers and the NCIs (National Church Institutions) to account. They have become more streamlined in recent years with the questions no longer needing to be read out and the answers already provided. We therefore move straight to supplementaries. The format didn't work so smoothly using Zoom. Putting up blue hands, unmuting and transfer between questioners and

officials was all rather clunky. Nevertheless duty was done. There were many questions including topics such as Individual cups for Holy Communion, Safeguarding, Abortion, Climate Change amongst other. Questions and Answers are accessible via the [Question Paper](#).

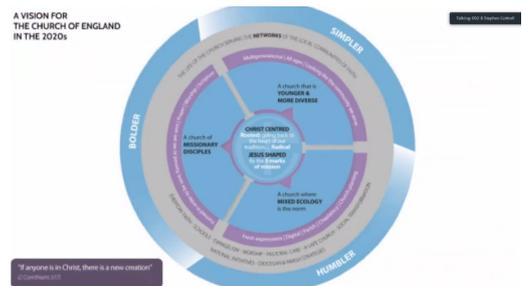
The business done, including votes is accessible via the Church of England [website](#).

## Tuesday 24th November

Much of the morning was taken up with a presentation on the work being done on Vision & Strategy. This is being done by very different methods to the way in which things have been done in the past.

For a start, it isn't going through a purely Synodical process. This was irritating for some traditionalists on Synod who showed they were upset by not being included. It also, sadly, upset some who felt that their constituency were not amongst the cohort of contributors.

The Archbishop of York and his panel attempted to allay their fears. Personally, I found the whole process rather enlightening as it wasn't being presented as a lengthy, wordy, document but as a single piece of paper, which is shown here.



The overall message was to strive for a Christ centred, Jesus shaped Church which was Simpler, Humbler and Bolder! My guess is that if the church is to survive it will also need to be less sclerotic.

The Cathedrals Measure was given a good hearing, spruced up by drafting amendments and passed with only a handful of abstentions.

The afternoon was serious. We started with the small matter of the budget for 2021. This was made more complex by the fallout for the NCIs and parishes alike from the pandemic. When a suggestion that the plan being proposed might not meet the reality of next year, the Chair of the Archbishops' Council Finance Committee said the alternative to Plan A was not Plan B but Plan D for Despair. He thought that actually the current proposal was Plan H for Hope. I was waiting for him to suggest via Plans F & G for Faith and Grace.

This was followed by a debate on the changes to the Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline Measure 2016. These were necessary to enable the recommendations of the IICSA report to be implemented. It was interesting that this was timetabled before the presentation and debate that we would be having on Wednesday.

We finished Tuesday by confirming the reappointment of Matthew Frost to the Archbishops' Council.

## Wednesday 25th November

Today had two very important items, on the face of it, together with an item that seemed very technical but, as we were to find out, long overdue. In addition we had an interesting debate on the Churches Conservation Trust and its funding.

The first, serious and gruesome task was to own up to the historic and continuing failure of the church to deal properly with the abuse that many have suffered at the hands of Christian leaders from our tradition. The IICSA report delivered many recommendations that were responded to in yesterday's debate.

Today was an opportunity for the survivor community to chide us for our failure, for us to collectively and individually to apologise but - more importantly - to commit to positive action to redress the issues. We had a brilliant presentation from the survivors. I can remember some 5 or 6 years ago meeting with Gilo (one of our presenters) who was concerned that he was about to give up his personal battle against the church. I am so glad that he continued with the task as his contribution was so valuable.

The second task was about changes to the way in which Diocesan Boards of Education are constituted. The issue here was whether there should be a single way of organising things or whether a mixed ecology can exist which reflects local needs. The later prevailed.

The final, planned, debate was to deal with the creation of a Clergy Register. It is an important part of the safeguarding landscape. However, we were reminded that the first call for a clergy register was over 400 years ago. The reason then was possibly less honourable.

The new register will eventually cover all licensed ministry. It's a tricky thing to identify all the thousands of lay ministry styles. So today's debate was to secure an initial ordained register.

The final item to be considered was the Commissioner's funding of the Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust looks after a selected number of redundant churches based in architectural and historical significance. The recommendation to continue funding over the next 3 years was deemed business but as a member had requested a debate we had the debate. Most of the funding comes from the State and charitable donations. Some comes from the Commissioners. It was an interesting debate as it is clear that the Trust does have a missional drive to use the stock they manage. It is still concerning that they only choose the redundant churches on architectural and historic significance grounds.

This was a different sort of Synod in which technical issue didn't entirely detract from the process we needed to pursue. There are still many advantages to face-to-face physical meetings. As an expedient it filled the bill. Lessons will have been learned and I look forward to February which will, hopefully, be my penultimate Synod. Who knows?

**Tim Hind**

**Bath & Wells**