

GENERAL SYNOD

REPORT on SEPTEMBER 2020 GROUP OF SESSIONS (LONDON)

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THURSDAY 24th - PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: The Archbishops shared the Presidential address. Archbishop Christopher first shared his hate of the Virus and its effects on human relations, on families on business and the church but drew lessons for us in perseverance and in working together for the common good. Archbishop Justin invited us to look forward and prepare for a changed church, quoting the impact at local level made by church people serving their communities and coping with new and often strange ways of worshipping.

DRAFT GENERAL SYNOD (REMOTE MEETINGS) (TEMPORARY STANDING ORDERS) MEASURE: GS2176A

General Synod met under CoVid-19 regulations on 24th Sept. to discuss and, if approved, to pass a Measure to allow the General Synod to hold Groups of Sessions virtually for consideration, debate, amendment and acceptance of Synod business other than by physical gathering at one time and in one place.

This seemingly odd objective arises from the wording of our constitution which requires such meetings. Parliament passed a law in March to allow for themselves a combined approach whereby MP's could attend in person, observing social distancing, masks etc OR virtually using Zoom, Teams or some other agreed virtual conferencing technology. Decisions reached, votes cast, speeches made etc. in the House and over the air therefore now form part of parliamentary records. Unfortunately, it was not possible to find parliamentary time to undertake a similar directive for the Church of England hence today's initiative.

The Church's answer is today's Measure (full title above). In detail it addresses the minutiae of how a virtual meeting can be authorised through the Standing Orders mechanism. (These guide all activities of General Synod and are tried and tested governance tools). The task was to complete all the stages needed from First Consideration through Revision (by the whole Synod) to Final Drafting and Final Approval ready for submission to the Ecclesiastical Committee of the Houses of Parliament and eventual Royal assent.

A particular element in Clause 1 is the power vested in the 6 Officers of General Synod (both Archbishops, Prolocutors of Canterbury and York and Chair & Vice Chair of the House of Laity) to make special Standing Orders to cover remote meetings. This is new and consequently the subject of some anxious debate around an amendment limiting this power to a single event, which was passed.

Other elements of Clause 1 of the Draft were then scrutinised. The Draft proposed that matters concerning Article 7 and Article 8 business were excluded from discussion at remote meetings. An amendment to include one or both of these was rejected. A further amendment insisting on certifying the urgency of matters to be brought before a remote meeting was also rejected. Throughout, there were continuing references to the "temporary" nature of the Measure's provisions.

Clauses 2, 3 & 4 of the Measure were then debated and passed with minor drafting changes at which point Synod broke for a late lunch. This is customarily an opportunity for Synod Members to discuss previous and upcoming business in a usually crowded and noisy canteen. Today, the canteen was an eerie, almost silent experience with staff moving Members back into the Hall together with their packed lunches or ushering those without outside to the nearest "Pret" or café.

The afternoon's business, completing the Final Drafting and Final Approval of the Measure was quite swiftly concluded, the final vote was taken electronically as usual. Results were as follows:

	For:	Against:	Abstentions:
House of Bishops:	14	0	0
House of Clergy:	42	0	0
House of Laity:	45	0	0

The Measure now stands remitted to the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament and subsequently the Royal Assent. Archbishop of Canterbury then prorogued Synod at 4:00PM, earlier than anticipated.

What will happen now? Assuming there are no hiccups in the assent process, it is probable that the November Group of Sessions will be remotely held although this will be decided nearer the date. Where Dioceses/Deaneries/Benefices/Parishes are already holding remote or virtual meetings these are unaffected. Where internet access is an issue, Dioceses may expect to receive more calls for help/guidance than at present.

As a parting thought it is important to bear in mind that the Measure is intended be a temporary fix to get round our inability to meet physically under current regulations. When (if) life returns to something approaching normal, there is an overarching desire to return to physical meetings.

We await developments!

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