

Notes from the meeting of The General Synod July 2023, York University

Debra Walker, Chair of the House of Laity, Liverpool Diocese

It was a tough General Synod with, at times, strong challenge from the floor to the Archbishops' Council regarding the much reported and concerning issues surrounding the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB) and the resulting effects on survivors. This theme never seemed to be very far away from any of the debates throughout the session.

Another pressing question was the draft Prayers of Love and Faith and Pastoral Guidance and when these would be presented. Synod was advised that there are now 3 working groups: Pastoral Guidance, Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) and Pastoral Reassurance. This work will be brought to the November 2023 General Synod.

The Archbishop of York gave the **Presidential address** (<https://www.archbishopofyork.org/news/latest-news/york-general-synod-2023-presidential-address>) based on The Lord's prayer and specifically on the little word with which it starts, 'our'. It declares a unity that is already there. We have got used to disunity but he reminded us that all who say this prayer belong to each other.

A record number of 237 **questions** were submitted. These were dominated by questions relating to Safeguarding/ISB and PLF/LLF (Living in Love and Faith). For those who may be interested, the link to all questions can be found here: (<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/questions-notice-paper-july-2023.pdf>)

A Private Members Motion (PMM) was debated that called for the creation of a **Church of England Youth Synod (CEYS)**. The debate raised some interesting points such as in Canada every Diocese has a voting youth delegate and we heard the story of one young child who described church as 'boring' and 'bums'. Our children can spend a lot of time in pews looking at people's backs and bums! After several amendments Synod passed the motion requesting Dioceses to develop ways to ensure the voices of young people are heard and the Business Committee are to bring forward proposals to facilitate youth representation at General Synod.

Climate change was also on the agenda both as a presentation and a debate. The Church National Investing Bodies have engaged with intent and commitment and have achieved significant eco friendly outcomes. Oxford Diocese tabled a motion calling for further actions within the church in line with the principles and milestones identified in the National Routemap to Net Zero Carbon. They gave an interesting presentation with a long, knitted 'scarf' illustrating Climate Stripes for Berkshire. You might like to take a look at the Liverpool climate stripes:

<https://showyourstripes.info/l/europe/unitedkingdom/liverpool>

Jack Shepherd (Liverpool) tabled a successful amendment for a commitment to improve the carbon footprint of vicarages and the final amended motion was passed.

Synod heard how studies have shown a beneficial **impact of religion on crime/delinquency**. This combined with our mission and social justice imperatives led to a motion urging parishes to work in partnership with the probation service, providing a welcome to people leaving prison and also calling upon Dioceses to nominate a contact person to link the Probation Service to local parish churches. One story was told of an ex-offender who 3 months after leaving prison was still having difficulty finding a church they could attend. The question was asked, 'is your church registered with the Welcome Directory?' Details here: <https://www.welcomedirectory.org.uk>. The motion was passed.

The presentation on **Safeguarding** was upsetting for a number of reasons. Following the debacle of the disbanding of the ISB we heard from a survivor who used phrases such as "the (Archbishops') Council did not listen", "they disbanded the only safety I had" and "it's not just trust, the most difficult part is the lack of care". We heard from The Archbishops' Council and Archbishop Justin spoke of his 'profound sadness' of where we find ourselves today. Nadine Daniel from Liverpool asked why the Council could not admit their failures and commission an independent inquiry, similar to L'Arche Community response to their own safeguarding crisis. Synod were discontent with what they heard and called on the Chair to allow the two persons 'sacked' from the ISB to be allowed to speak. The 'saga' of these events is ongoing and we await results from the Charity Commission inquiry and details of a new, truly independent safeguarding body. Independence and accountability were key themes, noting that accountability of the Archbishops' Council lies solely with the Charity Commission.

Synod also looked at **Redress** as part of safeguarding and recognised that redress is not simply about finance but also includes therapeutic, spiritual and emotional support, acknowledgment of wrongdoing,

and apology and support for rebuilding lives. A Victim and Survivor Working Group has been set up and Synod voted in favour of further work on this scheme.

Work on revised **Church Governance Structures** recommended the creation of a new service-focused body, the Church of England National Services (CENS) bringing together most functions of the Archbishops' Council, Church Commissioners, Central services and the Office of the Archbishops. This work is ongoing and will be brought back to synod for updates and debate.

The **Archbishops' Council's Budget** report indicated that before sustainability funding, Diocesan deficits in 2020-23 were expected to be around £40m and extrapolation to 2024-27, with flat parish share, shows an aggregate of Diocesan deficits of around £200m. John Spence gave an emotive speech about the need for us to be mountain people, looking out at our future vision. He invited us to consider the Coronation service and the much loved BCP whose language is not always understood by young people. It was also noted that generosity does not always correlate with giving. Liverpool members spoke in this debate reminding Synod of the financial inequalities between Dioceses. Miranda Threlfall-Holmes (Liverpool) made a plea for a rebalance in the way that around £400m, available for distribution/investment, is distributed in order to provide a more stress free, sustainable way for Dioceses to manage rather than the current, labour intensive process of 'bidding' for funds. The budget was accepted.

Amendments to the **Faculty Jurisdiction Rules** were considered including rules for submissions relating to 'contested heritage' of memorials and objects connected with racism and slavery. A new, racially diverse committee has been appointed to consider such issues and prepare draft guidance. In future, some explanation on how statutory guidance has been applied for such faculty decisions will be mandated.

The **Clergy Conduct Measure** repeals the Clergy Discipline Measure and replaces it with a new system, triaging complaints into 3 categories of grievance, misconduct or serious misconduct. Martin Thorpe from Liverpool made his maiden speech suggesting that a 3 year review of the new process might be helpful and advising that the role of the assessor is too important to be left to volunteers. This is an important piece of proposed legislation with which all our laity and clergy are greatly encouraged to engage and feed comments back to the committee.

Changes to allow for the introduction of **Electronic Registers** were passed, along with recommendations brought by the **Elections Review Group**.

Kate Wharton, Liverpool, proposed a motion on **Revitalising our Parishes for Mission**. This is in line with our national vision and strategy where all our stated outcomes depend on the missional vitality of our parishes and other worshipping communities. The debate was welcomed.

Draft proposals following a review of the **Mission and Pastoral Measure** (current framework originally conceived in 1968) was received and approved with draft legislation now expected in 2024.

We returned again to safeguarding on our final day to approve the **Safeguarding Code of Practice** and to have a lively debate on a Blackburn Diocese motion to **Reduce Parochial Fees for Marriage**. The argument to remove wedding fees is based on theological, missional and social justice issues, including the wording of the marriage service liturgy that tells us that marriage is a means of knowing God's grace and the fact that the current standard fee of £539 applies to both our wealthy and poorer parishioners. Despite concerns around loss of income the motion was passed following an amendment proposing a 'trial', likely to be run in a wealthy Diocese and a poor Diocese, where fees will be abolished and replaced with a request for a suggested donation.

There were a number of farewells including a particularly emotional farewell to Canon John Spence (Chair, Archbishop's Council Finance Committee) and Synod closed with farewells to 4 retiring Bishops, Bishop of Exeter, Sodor & Mann, Coventry and Carlisle.

This synod felt particularly long, with a couple of evening sessions sitting until 10pm.

It was challenging, upsetting, frustrating and yet at times also refreshing, bringing forward plans to help energise mission. Please continue to pray for all the work of synod and please, at this time, join with me and others in prayers for those survivors who feel let down by the church and for those who now need to find a compassionate way forward.

Note: Individual synod motions/debates are identified in **bold**.