

General Synod Report on the February 2023 Sessions held on 6th to 9th

February 2023

Debra Walker, Lay Chair, Liverpool Diocese

It was a long, fairly intense Synod meeting with a number of issues hitting the national newspapers. The most contentious issue was perhaps the motion brought by the Bishops to issue Prayers for use to bless couples in a stable, committed relationship, which could include married, same-sex couples. Whilst this particularly sensitive debate took around 8 hours it was, in the main, respectful and informative with members taking time to listen to each other.

There was quite a bit of legislation to get through due to Synod still playing catch-up since the pandemic when Zoom meetings did not easily lend themselves to legislative business and accompanying debates.

After our usual opening worship, we welcomed new members and guests and it was good to have our new Bishop John Perumbalath welcomed as The Bishop of Liverpool. Archbishop Justin gave the Presidential Address and spoke about the baggage we carry around with us and bring to debates such as LLF (Living in Love and Faith). He spoke of the Tower of Babel where people did not listen to each other - a scattering; in contrast to Pentecost, where we see a gathering together. We have no common language except for Christ's love and we need to learn what it is to be 'speaking Christian'. He exhorted us to lay our burdens on Christ and let God gather His church. The speech can be found here: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/speeches/general-synod-presidential-address-archbishop-justin-welby>

During these session, a measure was passed allowing dioceses more freedom to be generous with their historic wealth to other dioceses, thereby enabling a more equitable sharing of wealth. Inequalities in finances between dioceses has resulted in inequalities of both stipends and mission. Liverpool have previously benefitted from a donation from Oxford Diocese enabling the appointment of a Diocesan Racial Justice Officer. It is acknowledged that Liverpool have no historic assets and are financially one of the 'poorer' Diocese. This new measure will allow wealthier dioceses to support those dioceses with less wealth in the mission of the church.

There were a number of miscellaneous provisions made that included the creation of a new office of Lay Residentiary Canon, termination of a Bishop's mission order and the procedure for the sale of land in a vacancy.

The debate on the Cost of living reflected the impact of the highest levels of inflation in the UK for over 40 years and highlighted the very significant increases in energy prices that are adversely affecting both individuals and organisations. There was a commitment to do all we can to support the most vulnerable. Rev. Kate Wharton and Rev. Jack Shepherd both spoke in this debate drawing attention to the increased use of foodbanks and the difficulties faced by parishioners throughout our diocese. In his summing up, Canon Dr John Spence (Archbishop's Council) said we needed a narrative of hope. He thanked both Kate and Jack for their speeches and continued: "Kate and Jack I say to you: Liverpool, your Parish, your families your community, your city, may be very short of money - but they have you. They have the wonderful spirit that you show of a strong Diocesan team under a brilliant Chief Executive, and they have Bishop John - and I invite you to show us the narrative of Hope that is Liverpool, the Church of England."

The new National Director of Safeguarding, Mr Alexander Kubeyinje, gave an update on safeguarding. There was also a debate around parochial church fees where a proposal to increase fees by 5% rather than by the 9.9% increase in line with CPI inflation from January 1st 2023 was proposed. The debate centred around the church's mandate for mission, cost of

living hardship for parishioners and a recognition that any shortfall in income will necessitate money to be found elsewhere. The draft order was approved.

Synod received a review update on resourcing ministerial formation. This is an ongoing review examining the structure and funding arrangements for initial ministerial formation in order to strengthen the theological education for the whole people of God. This included a commitment for the provision of resources for the training of both ordained and lay. Similarly an update on the review of church governance structures was given. Church governance structures are thought to be too complex and therefore correct procedures and pathways are sometimes ignored in an attempt to 'get things done'. The review group are working to create a simpler, more effective governance structure for National Church Institutions (NCIs). The proposal is to reduce the number of NCIs from 7 to 4 and to create a new NCI, Church of England National Services (CENS) that will bring together many of the functions of the Archbishop's Council, Church Commissioners, Central services and the offices of the Archbishops.

A major theme of this session was Living in Love and Faith (LLF) with an afternoon of workshops and an 8 hour debate on proposals to replace 'Issues on Human Sexuality' with new pastoral guidance and commending and issuing Prayers of Love and Faith for blessing couples who are in a relationship. Such relationships could include, but are not limited to, same-sex couples. The Archbishop of Canterbury set the tone by noting that we are not divided, but we disagree. Our unity is in Christ despite our disagreement and everyone is needed within the body of Christ. He exhorted us not to give in to a fear of the future. 27 amendments were tabled but only one was carried. That amendment stated that the final version of the Prayers should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England.

The debate was mostly generous and gracious but not without emotion. Speeches were made covering a breadth of opinion, including one from the Archbishop of Alexandria who spoke as one of the voices warning of potential differences with the global Anglican communion. The votes on the final, amended motion were:

House of Bishops in favour 36, Against 4, Absained 2
House of Clergy in favour 111, Against 85, Abstained 3
House of Laity in favour 103, Against 92, Abstained 5

The motion was carried. We now wait for the Pastoral Guidance. A draft copy is promised for the next meeting of Synod in July 2023. It is of note that the response to many of the questions relating to LLF was to 'wait for the pastoral guidance'. This is clearly a key piece of work. Synod's response to the outcome of the debate was mixed and whilst there was much relief and some rejoicing, there was also a deep sense of frustration and difficulty. For some the blessing of same-sex couples is something they are unable to accept as a matter of conscience and the need for some sort of 'settlement' to enable them to remain as part of the Church of England was proposed. Discussions relating to what that 'settlement' might look like are ongoing.

So, the end of an exhausting synod. I received more than the usual emails prior to the meeting offering both advice/requests and prayers. Please continue to pray for our church as we seek to find a way forward in the midst of such deep disagreement and inevitable emotional turmoil.

We thank God for our own churches, deaneries and diocese. I pray that each of us here in the Diocese of Liverpool will continue to play our own part in being that living 'narrative of hope' as described by Canon John Spence in his summing up of the cost of living crisis debate.

With thanks and prayers.