

General Synod Report

following the final General Synod session held 9-12 July 2021.

This July saw the last session of this extended General Synod. The delayed easing of COVID regulations meant the sessions which were planned to take place at Westminster took place on zoom, but even given this a large amount of serious legislation was debated and passed as well as significant take note debates and reports presented. Take note debates are important as they indicate where the Synod's mind is moving, though they are not about passing nor even approving of what the reports they refer to are saying. In addition, the Church Commissioners and Archbishops' Council presented their annual reports, and the 2022 budget was passed.

A Racial Justice presentation was given and warmly received. There was however controversy about the failure to implement the proposal to introduce a racial justice officer into each diocese. There was robust commitment from both the Chair of the of the Archbishops' Council Finance Committee and the Archbishop that finances meant at present this couldn't be actioned, not least as the report Lament to Action had made its proposals after the 2022 budget had been prepared. The introduction of such posts across the church would have a major cost element and there may be other ways to introduce the same push for systemic institutional and radical change - change that was widely recognised as essential.

Legislation amending the Crown Nominations Commission (how diocesan bishops are selected) was presented in detail, with the expressed intention of introducing greater diversity into the process. This theme of diversity and inclusion was a seam running through a number of debates. Fr Julian Hollywell spoke in the CNC debate expressing support for changes and a concern for how processes would be introduced in practice.

Rather technical debates took place amending the standing orders of the General Synod, which although not the most exciting of topics are essential to both simplification of how the church makes its decisions and who is enabled to participate in those discussions. A matter of concern raised at our own diocesan synod was the limit in terms of office for lay deanery synod members which was removed.

An interim report on the proposals coming forward to radically update the Clergy Discipline Measure was a focus of considerable deliberation by the Synod with an implementation group charged with bringing proposals to the first session of the new Synod, which is a rather hopeful timescale! This received near universal approval as a take note vote. Linked to the current Vision and Strategy work presented by the Archbishop of York was a robust debate on the review of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011. Fr Julian spoke early in the debate advocating widespread training and raising the apparently insoluble conundrum we face, particularly in post-industrial areas, of the need to free up legislation given the number of inadequate buildings we have in poor condition in the wrong places if we are to invest in new communities.

The Synod also received a report from the Implementation and Dialogue Group on the Five Guiding Principles. There was general agreement that material needed updating with positive examples provided of mutual flourishing provided during the debate. There was a clear view expressed that it was important that it was recognised this is not a universal experience and how the Five Guiding Principles are being worked out is not always as positive. Revd Alicia Dring spoke early in the debate to this effect, as did the Bishop of Newcastle and in the ensuing take note vote the report was accepted with a significant number of members in all houses abstaining or voting against.

The Synod was dissolved by the Archbishop of York and elections to the new synod will now take place with its first session being opened by Her Majesty the Queen, God willing, at Westminster in November.