

General Synod July 2023 report

By Revd Neil Barber

Imagine a five-day continuous PCC meeting, pausing to eat and sleep, interspersed with worship - and on two days the published finish time being 10pm. That might give you an idea of what went on at the General Synod in York from Friday 7th July – Tuesday 11th 2023! The exhausting agenda was rammed – there was the usual library of paperwork to read and digest before and during the Synod. All the papers we discussed can be found at [this link](#)¹, though be warned the filing structure is quite daunting. If you would like to watch any of the debates, they're all online on [this link](#)².

Friday night opened with a debate about the business of Synod itself (GS2297). There was sympathy with the Business Committee itself who are under massive workload pressure and their need always to respond to the latest crisis. But there were a number of speeches expressing concern about Synod being manipulated and managed and there being a lack of trust. This became something of a theme of many debates during the Synod.

Youth Synod. Increasing the involvement of “young” people in Synod affairs was the subject of a Private Members Motion and a motion was passed to (a) co-opt 3 such folk to General Synod as soon as possible, and (b) to ask Archbishops’ Council to bring forward proposals for establish a gathering of young Church of England adults to engage with and discuss issues that they themselves see as important, and for this gathering to engage with General Synod. (Note: in the short term, “young” will mean 18-25 years old. Once safeguarding implications have been addressed, it is hoped to extend this to 16-17 year olds.)

A record number (237) of **Questions** were submitted and answered. This probably reflects the extent of the lack of confidence among Synod members that they are determined to try to hold the officers and Bishops to account in one of the few ways open to them. Friday night saw the first of two sessions given over to answering the questions (and supplementaries from the floor of Synod) and we got to number 59! The second session of question answering took place on Saturday morning and got to number 101! There was widespread frustration that so few of the questions were properly engaged with.

On Saturday morning as **climate change** update a presentation was given from the National Investing Bodies (NIBs) – ie the Church Commissioners, the CofE Pensions Board and CCLA. By working in partnership with even larger investors in groups such as the Transition Pathway initiative and Climate Action 100+, as part of the fifth mark of mission the NIBs have had a significant influence on the environmental policies of many companies. This came hot on the heels of a widely heralded announcement that the NIBs would on behalf of the Church of England disinvest their last remaining oil and gas investments. Derby’s Sue Cavill spoke supporting an amendment to the main motion commending the Church Commissioners decision to disinvest and asking them for active investment in sustainable energy. As the chair of the pensions investment board concluded the debate, it was apt to be reminded that the whole world belongs to the Lord and climate concern was an obvious outworking of the fifth mark of mission.

Saturday afternoon brought a frustratingly short but helpful debate, prompted by a motion from Worcester Diocese, about the place of faith in Jesus in **the rehabilitation of former offenders**. There

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/general-synod/agendas-papers/general-synod-july-2023>

² <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/general-synod/watch-general-synod-live>

was a short video from the Probation Service testifying to the impact of Christianity both amongst prisoners and as they are released into the community after their sentence. The mood of the debate was thankful and passionate about the grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ that we treasure so much in the Church of England. Around the chamber there was warm acknowledgement that Jesus came into the world for those who (know they) need a doctor, on the margins of society as for those everywhere. There was concern that former offenders being released do not always have a safe and supportive environment when they leave prison and that, with appropriate safeguarding agreements, churches were well placed to provide it.

The rest of the afternoon was taken up by a long panel discussion about **Living in Love and Faith** in which nothing new was disclosed about progress (or otherwise) of LLF and in which it was very evident that Synod remains deeply divided. Some expressed concern that the use of Canon B4.2 or B5, which are being floated as possible mechanisms for introducing the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF), is wrong, and that Canon B2 is the correct route for liturgical business. Others lamented that the PLF do not go far enough.

Sunday began uneventfully with morning worship at York Minster.

Main business on Sunday afternoon launched with a discussion around the recent sacking of two members of the **Independent Safeguarding Board**. Synod was consistently assured that the objective throughout has been, and remains, to ensure the Church of England is safe for all and that oversight of safeguarding must be both effective and independent.

Four members of the Archbishop's Council led Synod through a review and initial analysis of events that had led to their conclusion that the ISB should be disbanded. The heart of the problem was described as a catastrophic pastoral relationship breakdown between the three members of the ISB and the Archbishop's Council. Synod was unhappy to hear only the Archbishop's Council's side of the controversial events and a succession of speakers asked for a way to be found to allow the members of the now-sacked ISB to put their side of the story. After several procedural attempts were blocked from the platform, the formal session was suspended for ten minutes to allow two of the three former ISB members to address the members of Synod but not in formal session. The independent ISB members asserted that the Archbishops' Council had consistently not allowed the ISB to fulfil their terms of reference independently and that more than seventy survivors had advised them that the ISB as constituted did not have their confidence. Synod did not hear from the outgoing ISB chair or her predecessor and so there was a clear deficit in the information we were given. Also, little attention was paid to the fact that survivors and victims were in the room throughout. Synod were advised that the Archbishop's Council had already initiated an independent review that will inevitably lead to the overhaul and re-shaping of the oversight of safeguarding on a national level. There is an urgent need for a truly independent enquiry which will have the confidence and cooperation of everyone involved, especially survivors. The whole situation seemed very unsatisfactory and unresolved.

The business then moved to discuss the **National Redress Scheme**. This had a much more positive feel to it though we may be surprised that the Church of England is still in the process of defining a formal scheme that will provide redress to survivors and victims of church-based abuse. Thankfully that is now well underway. Synod received a presentation about the progress of the work to develop the scheme. Since all forms of abuse are sin, the scheme is an attempt to demonstrate proper corporate repentance for the wickedness perpetrated by those representing the Church of England and provide some sort of justice for those who have suffered. Redress will include enabling apology and acknowledgement to be given, a generous measure of financial compensation to be given and pastoral care to be provided in a systematic, consistent and confidential manner – overseen and operated by an independent body who will draw on established best practice from other areas of life.

National Church governance. On Sunday evening Synod debated a proposal to reorganise various internal bodies (the National Church Institutions) that had been in place for 20+ years. The aim is to build a simpler, more joined-up national church governance structure, to serve, support, encourage and enable the whole work of the Church across the nation into the future. The need to improve transparency, accountability and trust within the central church organisation and between it and the Synod and the wider church was mentioned extensively in the debate. With some minor amendments the proposal was approved.

Monday's agenda included a formal annual report of the Archbishops' Council (GS2308), followed by a presentation of the Archbishops' Council Budget for 2024 and apportionment plans (GS2309). There were several powerful contributions expressing concern about inadequate funding for theological colleges and Sarah Tupling, (in Derby representing Deaf Anglicans Together) made an impassioned plea for adequate funding for training for deaf people in ministry. Within the debate, an attempt was made to try to return to the ISB discussion but a complicated procedural motion worked to defeat this. John Spence (the outgoing Chair of the Archbishop's Council Finance Committee who visited Derby Diocesan Synod in March) exhorted Dioceses to continue to draw on £152m of Church Commissioners grants so far not used in addition to the new money approved for the Diocesan Investment Programme and People & Partnerships Funding. Included in the data that John reported was the depressing fall in the number of ordinands which has dropped since 2019-21 by 20%.

There was a substantial debate on clergy discipline. Synod received draft proposals to introduce a new measure, the **Clergy Conduct Measure** as soon as practicable to replace the existing Clergy Discipline Measure which has fallen into widespread disrepute. Synod passionately debated the merits of the approach being taken. Derby's Father Julian Holywell made an impassioned plea for a significant and appropriate improvement to the pastoral support to be provided for clergy under investigation. There appears to be a fair amount of work still to be developed, not least further clarity on the different processes needed to handle straight-forward complaints and those to address properly a concern about clergy misconduct. The debate will inform the work of the revision committee as it continues its work.

Synod also gave final approval to faculty jurisdiction rules, accepted the (optional) use of electronic registers for church services, welcomed a report of the review of the recent General Synod elections and approved an updated version of The Church Representation Rules.

Revitalising the Parish for Mission. Synod welcomed a paper by this name and written by the former Dean of Derby, Revd Dr Stephen Hance. *"The Church is working and praying towards a bold outcome to see the parish revitalised for mission, flourishing in every place so that each person in our nation may have the opportunity to hear and respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ."* It seemed sad that such an important subject was given so little time but Synod responded to the vision very positively and conducted the debate with enthusiasm and some joy in a record amount of time, incorporating a number of amendments.

The evening was taken up with a **Review of the Mission & Pastoral Measure 2011**. The work that has been done to bring this measure up to date was hotly debated by some, with regular reference to the need to address the imbalance of power between Dioceses and parishes, and was keenly supported by others. Synod welcomed the report and asked for legislation to be drawn up that will hopefully take into account the breadth and depth of feelings expressed in the debate. The intention was expressed that the new legal framework would seek to be more collaborative and trust-building, as well as more understandable and a better enabler of mission.

Tuesday's business included **Responding to the Climate Emergency**. An opening presentation set the scene around creation care and the urgent need for action to respond to climate change. Among other things, Synod discussed (a) commending the NIBs' recent disinvestments, (b) urging dioceses to review and update their environmental policies, (c) urging dioceses to commit significant expenditure to reduce the carbon footprint of vicarages, and (d) requesting optional changes to baptism services to include references to environmental safeguarding. While (c) and (d) received significant opposition during the item-by-item debate, the full motion incorporating them was eventually passed with a very large majority.

Reduce parochial fees for marriages. A motion originating from a PCC, through Deanery and Diocese in Blackburn, asked Synod to consider the impact of cost on the number of marriages. The statistics show that you are five times more likely to get married in a more well-off area than you are if in a deprived area. It was pointed out that many occasional offices are not charged for and that some other denominations already don't charge for weddings but there was some anxiety about the financial impact of dispensing with wedding fees. The proposal to have a time and location-limited trial was warmly approved by Synod after a positive debate.

Derby reps on General Synod:

The Bishop of Derby
Father Julian Hollywell
Revd Alicia Dring
Revd Neil Barber
Sue Cavill
Kat Alldread
Peter Kelsey
Sarah Tupling (Deaf Anglicans Together)