

General Synod
November 2020

This was a meeting of the General Synod via Zoom which lasted three days! The staff at Church House, Westminster, had worked hard to ensure that everything was in place and apart from a few hiccups with the voting system we were able to proceed once we were accustomed to the inevitable time lag from being called to speak and unmuting.

The Standing Orders for Remote Meetings of Synod were carried as was the enactment of Canons 40 and 41. This was followed by a Presidential address (from both Archbishops). Archbishop Justin talked of the effects Covid-19 has had on the country and in particular in our parishes, but he also spoke of the incredible ways in which churches have helped their communities. He spoke of the economic challenges we all face, of the results of the IICSA report and the present debate over international funding. He mentioned the immigration problems and climate change, but in all of this we should act in Faith and look to Christ. Archbishop Stephen explained how the various groups had been set up for the 'vision and strategy' work. He said that we should trust in God and love each other as difficult decisions would have to be made.

We had a presentation on the Living in Love and Faith project. The resources have now been produced and parishes are expected to engage with the process over the next year.

A debate followed on a response to Covid-19. It was noted that those living in poverty were more likely to contract the virus. Home working is not always possible, space is limited and finances are lower. Within our church communities use has been made of technologies leading to a 'mixed ecology of Church'. Amendments to the motion included disabled people, children living in poverty, those denied equal access to healthcare and those in residential care. Another amendment from the Archbishop of York called upon HMG to preserve the 0.7% of GDP foreign aid budget. The amended motion was easily carried.

The Business Committee's report on the Agenda attracted some criticism – a desire for more debate on the future of the Church, closed churches, finance and the concern over the parish system. Although the motion was carried there were a significant number of votes against taking note of the report.

Question time ended the day.

Tuesday began with a presentation on the Vision and Strategy project. The Archbishop of York had led a consultative process which included hundreds of people of all ages and from all parts of the Church and from outside the Church. The main theme was that the Church must be Jesus shaped and Christ centred. The Church needs to resource Missionary Disciples, to use a 'mixed ecology', to have diversity in unity, to be younger and more diverse and to invest in the virtues of simpler, humbler and bolder.

The Cathedrals Measure was presented for final approval.

John Spence presented the Archbishops' Council Budget and Apportionment for 2021. He said that in spite of financial concerns there are signs of hope. Questions were asked about the funding of lay ministry training which he said was in mind for the future. Numbers have fallen significantly over the last five years and it is up to us to help growth and invest in the future of

the Church. Looking to the sustainability of churches he said we need to be radical and not conservative in our approach.

Safeguarding was an important item on the agenda. We considered an amendment to the 2016 Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline measure. This included mandatory reporting, a crucial code of practice, and request that there should be a Discipline Measure for the Laity. A presentation on Safeguarding was held on the following morning. The final IICSA report had been published in October and this was partly in response to its recommendations. We heard from some of the survivors of abuse – a sensitive and moving presentation. One of those who was part of this group suggested that the recommendations did not go far enough and urged the Church to be as stringent as possible. The recommendations in the report include: renaming Safeguarding advisors as Officers, information sharing, introducing a national policy for victims and survivors, continue with external auditing. The Church, Bishops, Safeguarding Team and everyone is to be held to account. In debate it was suggested that there is a need for independent scrutiny and redress. Survivors must be at the centre of response. There needs to be a change of culture and a challenge to a misuse of power and secrecy. Process and structures need challenging, the Clergy Discipline Measure needs updating, speed is important but investigation must be thorough. Above all there must be repentance and redress.

A Diocesan Boards of Education Measure was debated for final approval. Whilst it was welcomed there was some concern that it still allowed for ‘unincorporated’ boards to continue. However, it gained approval and will produce a measure that is flexible and easier to modify. The setting up of a National Ministry Register has been more than 400 years in the making since the initial request from King James 1 (VI)! This would make it easier to see who has a licence in the Church of England. An amendment requiring the Archbishop of the relevant province to register bishops was passed. The whole motion was passed and should make it simpler in the future.

A debate was called on the payment to the Church’s Conservation Trust. This trust cares for many of our closed churches and especially those of historical interest. However, there was a question on how some of the money was spent and why so many were employed by the trust when similar trusts employed fewer people. Payment to the trust was agreed by Synod but the questions remain!!

It seems as though the February sessions will also be held on Zoom – necessary but very tiring!

After prorogation of the Synod Archbishop Justin gave us his blessing.

Richard Morgan