

General Synod November 13-15 2023

It is unusual for Synod to meet in November, however the dates are always set aside for contingencies and were used this year because of the need to give timely attention to Living in Love and Faith (LiLF). Other important business was also transacted, but this report is not exhaustive.

Recordings of the sessions are available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/general-synod/watch-general-synod-live> and papers at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/general-synod/groups-sessions-information/general-synod-november-2023>

Presidential Addresses:

Synod always begins with an address from one of the two Presidents (the Archbishops of Canterbury and York), on this occasion both Archbishops spoke.

Archbishop Justin spoke powerfully of the traumatic world context in which we met. Please read his speech in full at <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/presidential-address-synod-archbishops-canterbury-and-york>. He ended with a recorded message from Archbishop Hosam Naoum in Jerusalem, following which synod stood in silent prayer.

Archbishop Stephen's address (again available in full) focussed on LiLF, recognising the hard place in which we stand, the depth of our divisions and challenging us to remember who we are in Christ and to see Jesus in the business of Synod. We are called by Christ to truth and unity, and in this, he said, all of us will find ourselves having to make painful decisions, some compromises, and to love each other with greater fortitude and determination. We will need to look to Jesus upon the cross the place from which he sees us and breaks down the barriers between us. He ended by giving thanks to the Bishop of London Sarah Mullally for her costly leadership in the process and she received a standing ovation.

Report of the Business Committee

This report is always presented early in a Synod by the chair of the business committee, currently Robert Hammond, a member of the House of Laity from Chelmsford Diocese. The subsequent debate gives the opportunity for more general comments on the business of Synod from the floor and an opportunity to gauge the mood of Synod. Key themes were the behaviour of Synod, a reminder that we can appear very inward looking and a plea for a wider number of people to be called to speak rather than the usual voices. When we came to the main debate on LiLF it was clear that this last point had been heard.

LiLF

The discussions around this were long and complex and not easy to summarise, not least because we are in the middle of a process. And the subject matter is difficult and contentious, as everyone recognises, it was significant that on the first afternoon of Synod, in an informal presentation chaired by Bishop Sarah, we heard from four bishops with varying points of view. There is no neutral position, and in terms of this report though I have tried to be objective I am aware that other of our Diocesan representatives would have written it differently and included other things.

The position as it stands now is that by small majorities in all three houses (unsurprisingly the largest majority was in the House of Bishops) Synod approved the following motion:

‘That this Synod, conscious that the Church is not of one mind on the issues raised by Living in Love and Faith, that we are in a period of uncertainty, and that many in the Church on all sides are being deeply hurt at this time, recognise the progress made by the House of Bishops towards implementing the motion on Living in Love and Faith passed by this Synod in February 2023, as reported in GS 2328, encourage the House to continue its work of implementation, and ask the House to consider whether some standalone services for same-sex couples could be made available for use, possibly on a trial basis, on the timescale envisaged by the motion passed by the Synod in February 2023.

I’m not going to go into the complexity of precisely what is authorised under what piece of church legislation, I do recommend you to read GS 2328 (it is long but not as scary as it looks!). Put simply, the trajectory agreed in February’s Synod will continue. For some this crosses a red line, for others it offers a disappointingly few crumbs, language that was used in Synod. No-one is any doubt about the depth of the disagreements, for me the Bishop of London nailed it when she said that not only are we disagreeing, we are disagreeing about the nature of the disagreement. And as the motion acknowledged there is uncertainty, uncertainty about how the implementation of what has been agreed will work out, especially as the pastoral guidance which will accompany the use of the prayers is still a work in progress, uncertainty as to the implications and the provision for those who in conscience cannot accept this. I think it’s important to get across how seriously all your representatives take this, the debate lasted eight hours in a packed chamber. We worked our way through a considerable number of amendments, that can seem like tedious politicking but it is the mechanism to refine the business before us and the voting on each amendment builds up a picture of the balance of opinion in the Synod. It is also important to acknowledge how costly the debate was for those most personally affected. There was also a recognition that underlying this issue are deep differences as to the interpretation of Scripture and the nature of the Church.

Abuse Redress Scheme

Another very important issue – this came to Synod for first consideration. The new Measure is being designed to give financial and other compensation to those who have been abused. Among other details the proposal covered entitlement to compensation and liability. Of key interest to many here is the proposal that PCC’s should share in the liability for abuse committed by those for whom the PCC is the accountable body. Liability would not extend to individual members or trustees, and considerable work had been done to address concerns about the assessment of the amount of the liability though of course many concerns remain.

It is of crucial importance that the PCC should obtain insurance.

It was stressed that this is not about penalising accountable bodies but sharing in a whole church approach to our contrition for what has been perpetrated.

The debate included a broad acceptance of the principle of redress but with many questions of the detail which will now be considered by the revision committee.

Addendum:

Amanda Robbie helpfully provided the following details of General Synod Committees of which Lichfield Reps are members:

Amanda Robbie: Remuneration and Conditions of Service

Clergy Conduct Measure Revision Committee

Treena Larkin: Standing Orders Committee

Ros Clarke: Standing Commission on the Five Guiding Principles

Chris Gill: Audit and Risk Committee of the Archbishops' Council