

## **GENERAL SYNOD, JULY 2023 – Summary of Main Items**

The July 2023 meeting of General Synod took place at York University from Friday 7<sup>th</sup> to Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> July. It was a very busy meeting, combining “big topics” with legislative detail. All the papers we discussed can be found at

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/general-synod/agendas-papers/general-synod-july-2023>, though be warned the filing structure is quite daunting.

There is usually at least one item of General Synod Business that is badly misreported by the national press, and this time it was **THE OPENING ADDRESS BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF YORK** *[Friday afternoon]*. He did not “wade into the controversial debate on God’s gender”, as one newspaper put it, but rather gave a personal reflection and challenge based on the Lord’s prayer.

<https://www.archbishopofyork.org/news/latest-news/york-general-synod-2023-presidential-address>

**SAFEGUARDING** *[Mostly Sunday afternoon]* was undoubtedly the major topic of this Synod. Feelings among a number of synod members were running high following the recent sacking of 2 members of the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB) by the Archbishop’s Council (AC). A presentation by members of the AC explained that the intention had been for this incarnation of the ISB to be a fixed-term semi-independent Phase 1 body, enabling contact with victims/survivors and establishing a more permanent and fully independent Phase 2 body underpinned by legislation. We were told that in the eyes of the AC, this ISB had not done sufficient work on the second objective, and moreover there had been a serious breakdown of relationship. Having already referred itself to the Charity Commissioners, the AC told synod that it is now proposing (a) an independent inquiry into these events, and (b) that an independent body is engaged to set up the Phase 2 (full independent ISB). After much procedural wrangling, two (now former) members of the ISB, who had chosen to be present as observers, were invited to speak. They gave a very different account of events and stated that many abuse victims/survivors have expressed dismay at the sacking of the ISB. Feelings continued to run high among some (though not all) Synod members, with frequent references to a “lack of trust”. In spite of this, Synod overwhelmingly approved:

- an outline bill setting out a Safeguarding Redress scheme, initially underpinned by £150m of Church Commissioners money.
- A code of practice for Safeguarding reviews, aligning our processes with external good practice. *[Tuesday morning]*

*As a postscript the 3<sup>rd</sup> member of the ISB (and acting chair) has also been reported as resigning her position on the Wednesday morning following Synod, as well as her role as the independent chair of the Church’s National Safeguarding Panel (NSP).*

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/236062>

**THE ENVIRONMENT** also featured prominently in our discussions.

- Firstly, *[Saturday morning]* we had a presentation 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+, the NIBs have had a significant influence on the environmental policies of many companies. Having recently ended their last remaining oil and gas investments, the NIBs are now focusing on major energy consumers such as cement, steel and automotive industries.
- Secondly, *[Tuesday morning]* we debated a motion on “responding to the climate emergency”. Among other things, we 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.

### **INCREASING THE INVOLVEMENT OF “YOUNG” PEOPLE IN SYNOD AFFAIRS**

*[Friday evening]* was discussed, 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 CofE 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.)

**REVITALISING THE PARISH FOR MISSION.** *[Monday afternoon]* We affirmed the parish system as a central component of our “mixed ecology”, welcomed the Church’s commitment to increasing the number of ordinands and encouraged each parish and Diocese to use Mission Action Planning to become more effective in parochial mission.

### **THE CONTRIBUTION OF FAITH TO THE REHABILITATION OF PRISONERS**

*[Saturday afternoon]* was discussed. We heard about people who had become Christians in prison but had then struggled to find churches that would welcome them. There was widespread support for calling on dioceses to partner with the Probation Service to enable a swift welcome of offenders, subject to appropriate safeguarding boundaries.

**REDUCTION IN CHURCH MARRIAGE FEES.** *[Tuesday morning]* There was a passionate debate about the rightness (or not) of charging couples to get married in church. A number of speakers argued that we should not discourage poorer folk from getting married, and that encouraging marriage in church is a great missional opportunity. Some argued that we cannot afford the loss of fees, but others argued that the loss of income from fees would be more than covered by voluntary gifts on the day and by subsequent giving of the new disciples. In the end, an amendment was passed to hold a regional, time-limited trial, the cost to be funded by Archbishops’ Council.

We were given a presentation on an **UPDATE ON LIVING IN LOVE AND FAITH** *[Saturday afternoon]*, followed by an opportunity to ask questions. Synod remains deeply divided on this issue, and indeed the topic spilled over into a number of other debates during Synod. Some expressed concern that the use of Canon B4(2), which is being floated as a possible mechanism for introducing the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF), is wrong, while others lamented that the PLF do not go far enough. The steering group is intending to bring proposals on this subject to the November Synod, covering prayers, pastoral guidance and pastoral “reassurance”.

We agreed the **ARCHBISHOPS’ COUNCIL BUDGET 2024**, *[Monday morning]* noting that recent reductions in central costs have saved around £3m/year, and also that in spite of high inflation, the share requested from Dioceses is 5.2% below the level of 2019 and 2020. We also said farewell to John Spence, Chair of the Archbishop’s Council Finance Committee and one of the most remarkable people many of us have met.

Other significant items included: further discussion of **NATIONAL CHURCH GOVERNANCE**, *[Sunday evening]* where we agreed to bring forward legislation to simplify the central organisation, thereby improving accountability, increasing efficiency and reducing costs; agreeing **RECOMMENDATIONS TO REPLACE THE MISSION AND PASTORAL MEASURE** *[Monday evening]* with a new suite of legislation that aims to be more collaborative and trust-building, as well as more understandable and a better enabler of mission; we agreed to bring in an *optional Electronic Register Book of Services Form* *[Monday afternoon]*;

Beyond this, Synod members asked and received written answers to a record number (237) of questions, though we only had time to further discuss half of these *[Friday evening and Saturday morning]*, and we discussed and sometimes made legislative changes around a number of procedural and administrative topics.

Recordings of the proceeds can be reviewed on the Church of England YouTube Channel

Friday afternoon	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rs15RvffCIU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rs15RvffCIU</a>
Saturday morning	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opwYruKmHCl">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opwYruKmHCl</a>
Saturday afternoon (LLF)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CamIXZ_gL4o&amp;t=1838s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CamIXZ_gL4o&amp;t=1838s</a>
Sunday afternoon	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYu3MDRecUY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYu3MDRecUY</a>
Sunday evening	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq-h-0JvsjQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq-h-0JvsjQ</a>
Monday morning	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDbScwxqJhY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDbScwxqJhY</a>
Monday afternoon	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoNZpg9IbQE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoNZpg9IbQE</a>
Monday evening	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bth6_-RPN4E">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bth6_-RPN4E</a>
Tuesday morning	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxSfXzi20Es">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxSfXzi20Es</a>

The next General Synod meeting is in London, from 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> November.

**Chris Gill**  
**July 2023**