

## **Report of General Synod proceedings, February 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> 2025**

The latest group of sessions of General Synod, held this February in London, was both long and demanding. The first half of the week was dominated by safeguarding, and the last couple of days by revisions to Vacancy in See Committee and Crown Nomination Commission amendments, but there was much other business conducted too. For a full report, the best sources are the Church Times report published on February 28<sup>th</sup> and the General Synod section of the Cof E website (see links at the end of this report). This report is inevitably partial and influenced by my own stance, so it is worth looking at the fuller reports too and talking to our other elected representatives.

Before we arrived, there were rumblings about protests on the first day which were planned to disrupt or even cancel the Archbishop of York's presidential address, but some clever footwork got us through this. After the normal opening prayers, there was a vote asking for the presidential address to be replaced with a time of prayer and silence, but this was lost overwhelmingly with no real sign of the threatened protests and walkouts. The actual address included a litany led by the Bishop of London and two senior female lay officials. The public gallery, which had been packed with a heavy press presence in particular, emptied significantly and we moved to normal business, receiving the report of the Business Committee. Everyone speaking was careful to remind us of the rules, and there was encouragement to vote according to our own conscience and view. The need to care for each other and to acknowledge our vulnerabilities was stressed and we were reminded of our Code of Conduct and that we do not have parliamentary privilege. We were reminded that victims and survivors were likely to be present both as visitors and on the floor, and that pastoral support was available. As ever we were reminded that the actual content and structure of papers is not in the control of the Business Committee. Relatively unusually, we were told to keep the November dates in our diaries as it was not yet clear whether we would need to meet then.

Later in the afternoon, we had a session on the Makin report, the first of two items on safeguarding. This included a reminder to think about victims and survivors of John Smyth including in Africa, and our collective responsibility. Points raised included a reminder that the statements from survivors are very varied, and the danger of 'inner rings'.

On Tuesday, after morning prayer led by diocese of London, we considered the final report on the racial justice work. Lord Boateng was the key speaker, and the Bishop of Dover moved the motion. Many people wanted to speak. One particularly powerful speech by Andrew Mumby focused on reparatory justice and asked us to stand if we believe in this- most present did indeed stand. There were many supportive speeches including one by our own Sonia Barron. We proceeded to a counted vote of the whole Synod which was nearly unanimous.

We then moved to the main item on safeguarding. After a debate around the order of amendments on the order paper, we moved to debate on the substantive issues. The co-chair of the response group which had produced the report spoke well, but using her NHS experience of restructuring to claim we can do it seemed to me to be possibly not the best example. It was admitted that the response group was divided between the two options. The chair of the session gave us a careful introduction in terms of how we could have a reasoned and nuanced debate on the options in front of us. Bishop Joanne moved the main motion. Interestingly the public gallery was not as full as I had expected, with perhaps eighty per cent of the seats filled. As the speeches progressed, there was much I could agree with in what was said about both models but also a clear lack of consensus behind either Model 3 or 4. As a result it was not a surprise that Synod rejected both Models and so we moved to the Bishop of Blackburn's amendment, which has become known as Model 3.5 and which was passed by all three houses with hefty majorities. There was a final amendment adding an apology, which after some debate was passed after a counted vote. The amended motion was then debated and passed. Overall this was a calm and respectful debate and we have a clear direction forward, whereby work should start straight away on creating an independent oversight body to include the national Safeguarding team, with further exploration of the viability of Model 4's total transfer of diocesan and cathedral teams to the independent body. Watch this space...

Wednesday started with Eucharist- this included a particularly moving sermon from Archbishop Anne Germond, Metropolitan of the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario and acting Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada. We then had speeches from both ecumenical visitors. The first, the Most Revd Urmas Viilma, Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia, set out a context where there is no one dominant church and less than a third identify as religious (last census). His church is the only national one, with 500 years plus of tradition. Ecumenical groupings are very important, with a need for theological discussion in society about polarising issues. There is a five-year strategy for this, this year focusing on authority and interpretation of the Bible. Nearly a quarter of the population is Russian, and many are part of the Orthodox Church that is supporting the war in Ukraine. The churches are involved in emergency planning around possible escalation, and it was sobering to hear about that kind of planning by a church so near to a real risk of war. We were reminded that the bit of Ukraine occupied at the beginning of the war is bigger than England. Looking back to 1945, it needs to be asked whether Yalta was just, as well as what kind of peace can be achieved for Ukraine. They have to hold onto the hope of light in the darkness

Anne Germond brought us many prayers from Canada and told us that friends in Canada were tuning in, thanks to the gift of technology. She thanked Archbishop Stephen for his visit. She spoke of being here in great humility, representing a church that has equally difficult synods filled with contentious issues and division eg residential schools – with issues around every child mattering, and reconciliation. She spoke of the pain for the LGBTQI community as the marriage canon has not changed. She had so far found this synod to be respectful and prayerful; she reminded us we are a global church, not congregational, so we share each other's pain. In all moments of internal trial, when one part suffers, we all suffer with it, and when one celebrates, we all celebrate- Ubuntu Our decisions affect the whole communion, and we avoid difficult discussions at our peril- she asked for our prayers. Canada is a bit like here, with some very strong dioceses and some very vulnerable- one where the diocesan bishop is the only paid member of staff, some churches six to eight hours from the next nearest one. More are becoming vulnerable, and there is a challenge as to how to support them, but they are not poor, but rich because they have the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are flourishing ecumenical partnerships with Lutherans and Moravians, also a 'church without borders' network. They face difficulties around Trump and current USA statements about Canada's future. She asked for prayers for their General Synod in London Ontario, which meets every three years and elects the next primate (clergy and laity, bishops recuse themselves). She closed by reminding us that when we are at the end of our strength God renews us and we will soar like eagles.

The next item, a Private Members' Motion (PMM) on working class ministry, was brought by Revd Alex Frost, a parish priest in Burnley. (Incidentally he has also recently been on BBC Radio 4's File on 4, talking about the very real issue of ketamine addiction in young teenagers, worth hunting out on BBC Sounds). In a very powerful and funny opening address, he made such points as 'If you are wondering if you are working class, you almost certainly aren't' and 'If you always do what you've always done, you will always get what you've always got'. He pointed to this motion as a chance to be bold and ambitious; 'There is wonderful stuff going on, standing up for the most vulnerable, yet in other places the CofE is speaking a completely different language of snobbery and exclusion. We can't change who we are or where we are from- but look at where Jesus drew his apprentices from- fishermen, tax collectors and so forth'. (It's worth saying that in many ways I wasn't looking forward to this week but in these first days it continued to surprise me with its gifts, including this debate.) In other speeches, Rachel Mann made the point that those from working class origins don't want pity or sympathy but solidarity, to be understood and not boxed in by stereotypes. Ayo Audu (Oxford) reminded us that the Lord's Prayer starts with 'Our Father', not 'My Father'. We heard how the dominance of the middle class in the CofE can lead to failure to select for training from the full range of the population. The Archbishop of York talked about how his own background as a secondary modern pupil then having a polytechnic degree had not been seen as good enough in the discernment process- he had to have a 'proper' degree to do a theology degree. We need to prioritise mission experience and need to be challenged over our language and culture and the barriers this creates. He explained that as a matter of principle, since becoming Archbishop, he doesn't sign PMMs, but would have wanted to sign this one. Gary

Waddington reminded us that the financial barrier for those from working class backgrounds can continue through ministry. Definitions are hard but he asked us to avoid lazy tropes that entrench social differences. We heard that functional illiteracy is a huge barrier- 20% of working population have a reading age of less than that expected of an average 9-year-old. It is hard to avoid seeming to be condescending when trying to be helpful- and good old-fashioned snobbery still exists in the CofE today. He hoped that this debate would help change the narrative. (At this point the Chair checked and found no one wanting to speak against the motion.) Bishop Mark Tanner, as chair of the Ministry Development Board, spoke to say he was committed to change, and proud to second this PMM. Vocations are of course both lay and ordained- but vocation is not just about ministerial roles. We need to avoid imposing middle class solutions on working class people, including not assuming there are no barriers. We need to listen to people's situations and not pigeonhole them; we have unconscious bias about our unconscious bias! In summing up, Fr Frost asked us to tear down the curtain; 'let's sing songs that people know... we can change this if we choose to'. The motion was passed with no amendments.

We then had some delayed business from Tuesday on sport and wellbeing ministry and an encouragement for dioceses to engage in this and commit resource. This continued after lunch and the motion was passed, but with an important speech first from Charlie Bell warning us about evangelism by stealth.

We then moved to the final stage of the Clergy Conduct Measure. There was a lively debate broadly welcoming this and it was passed nem con by an electronic vote by Houses. The effect is to introduce three levels of offence, from grievance which can be dealt with by a light touch and may well end in no penalty to the most serious.

The Safeguarding Codes of Practice were debated (partly because of the efforts of our own members), not because we had any problem with the content but because we thought it was import at that all safeguarding business was brought to the floor of Synod and not deemed. A helpful and informative discussion followed and the Codes were passed on a show of hands.

On Thursday the mood changed; this was a very difficult day. We had an excellent start with a powerful speech from one of our younger members around hearing more young voices, in which we passed a motion proposing that a national network of 18-25 year olds should be created and that this group of people should in some way identify three members to attend General Synod as non-voting members (the rules don't allow for them as voting members, but there was also a recognition of the need to find ways to get a younger and more diverse range of people standing in the normal way for election.) A presentation on Living in Love and Faith followed, but this was largely a holding position with no real progress and nothing to vote on. We then turned to revision of the CNC regulations. The respectful and thoughtful mood of the earlier part of the week disappeared as factionalism came back, with a process which allows anyone to call for a counted vote by Houses on any item and if 25 people stand this is what happens. The advantage of this, if you are opposed to a proposal, is that the proposal then has to be approved separately by each of the three Houses, and it is thus easier to defeat items that would pass on a simple majority. Many very sensible proposals were rejected in this way despite strong arguments for them. The atmosphere was one of distrust of our Archbishop and bishops and speeches were not always respectful of other members. By lunchtime I was both depressed and embarrassed that fellow members had behaved in this way.

The afternoon was a long one. We had substantial work to do on the new National Governance Measure but time for debate on the main item was curtailed because of a series of amendments, nearly all of which we rejected.

Friday started with an important first consideration of the new Mission and Pastoral Measure. This should make many processes much simpler, particularly when it comes to church closure, and introduces the concept of a fallow period for churches that are struggling but don't want to close. This has much to commend it but both closure and, potentially, fallow periods add to the costs

borne by the diocese in terms both of future insurance costs and in terms of staff time. We are fortunate that our own Nigel Bacon is to chair the Revision Committee, which also gives him a seat on the Steering Committee, so will be assured of these issues being carefully explored.

We then moved to a revision of the Vacancy in See Committees regulations and were rapidly back into a factional approach. Every amendment seemed to have an amendment to the amendments designed to wreck it. I find it hard to write neutrally about this, as the underlying tensions so present in all the work around the Prayers of Love and Faith seemed to be behind so much of what was happening. I made no secret when I stood for election that I was standing as a member of Inclusive Church, so I think it will come as no surprise that I was saddened by the loss of some very valuable amendments which would in my opinion have made both Vacancy in See and CNC more inclusive in every sense. An amendment from the Bishop of London, Bishop Sarah Mullally, suggesting that every Vacancy in See Committee should have a duty to ensure that the diocesan members elected to any CNC should as a minimum include at least one ordained and one lay female member, was bitterly opposed by some (and yet as we know, women are by no means only a third of the general population, or of congregations in the CofE). At one point Bishop Sarah was visibly distressed and angry, talking about the years of fighting such micro-aggressions in her career; many of us stood in support of her, and eventually this amendment was passed. I was so sad that what had started as a week of listening and respect, with many moving moments, ended as a fractious debate where listening prayerfully seemed to come second to supporting whichever faction members identified with- and this does not exclude those of us on the inclusive side, who had to play the same 25 member game to force votes by Houses. I left both enriched by some of the debates earlier in the week and saddened by our inability to rise above game playing. Please pray for all of us on General Synod, that we may find a better way to explore and resolve difference whilst remaining one church.

Muriel Robinson (one of your elected lay members).

General Synod February 2025 | The Church of England will take you to all the papers and the live feed.

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/> should help you get to the digest but unless you are a subscriber you can only read two articles a month, sadly! You may find your local clergy have the paper copy still.