

February 2024

Open Synod Group Newsletter



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PENNY ALLEN

Newsletter taken from Penny's personal web page diary and is her personal opinion.
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General Synod February 2024

23rd-27th FEBRUARY 2024 in London.

I attended this meeting online due to ill-health. It is not in date order.

*Archbishop Justin Welby used his **Presidential Address** to highlight the number of issues affecting the world. Using the words of the Sec Gen of the UN, 'the world is coming off its hinges' he highlighted the many countries with war and violence and the reference the Pope has made to the possibility of WW3. In the UK poverty, broken families and abuse are only some of the issues, but the Psalms tell us that this is not new. He referenced Psalm 56, people without hope and rescue, the relentlessness of suffering and fear disguised as uncertainty. He apologised fully for the failure of the ISB, accepting full responsibility for this.*

Business Committee Report. This is the first time that GS has met in London at a weekend to help those working, who have previously had to take annual leave. Business was outlined and members queried the absence of the Governance Report, the need for a ceasefire in Gaza, the personal and adversarial attacks taking place, the 'brink of the precipice' we are standing on and gave thanks to the support staff.

Vacancy in See. Corrections and minor improvements to the regulations, allowing for remote meetings, co-opted members, CNC elections, power of Archbishops to direct the committee.

Amending Canon 43. Miscellaneous Provisions was passed, changing the texts from Queen to King; rules for making sure open churches have worship; taking out references to widows and widowers in the marriage service; Cathedral Lay Residentiary Canons to have at least 6 years' service as a reader or Lay Minister. Rural Deans can also refer to Deputy RDs and for Ecclesiastical Courts there must be a solicitor or barrister of senior standing in England and Wales.

Parochial Fees for Funerals. Diocese of London Motion. The previous decision to send all fees to the diocese was reversed and PCCs can now have those fees. A return to 2020.

Questions Session 1. Aply chaired by Rev Zoe Heming with tighter rules for supplementary questions to hasten the process. 225 questions submitted from clergy working patterns and finances to Racial Justice; self-supporting Ministry; 60 on LLF; the CNC; faculties; Church Commissioners; delay in clergy payroll; sales of churches; retirement housing; climate change; ISB; safeguarding etc.

Conduct of PCCs. Chelmsford Diocese. Highlighting the destructive behaviour of some members of PCCs which disrupt the clergy and congregations and cause harm. A Code of Conduct is available in some dioceses and a template that could be refined by churches was asked for.

Questions Session 2. Again chaired by Rev Zoe with questions on parish and general safeguarding; the Makin, Wilkinson and Jay reports [the latter delivered just two days before GS]; College of Bishops' meetings; Carbon Net Zero; A Rocha; ordinands; statistics; diocesan finances etc. Despite the two sessions the later questions ran out of time.

Safeguarding. Following the Wilkinson Report a presentation was made as the Jay Report had just arrived and she had prepared a video summarising her findings which made plain her disquiet and put the case for two bodies, an Independent Safeguarding Body and an Oversight body, both charities to be supported by the Church Commissioners. Despite the calls for immediate action a considered

approach from a Working Party was favoured and carried. The Wilkinson Report is a chronological account of the ISB from inception to ending. Both Reports are highly critical.

Land and Nature. This motion was to highlight biodiversity and focus on Net Zero by 2030. Churchyards and 'Caring For God's Acre' provide an opportunity for biodiversity. Diocesan land and glebe offer opportunities for food, housing, flood prevention and a diocesan action plan to improve the biodiversity of these is called for, linked to the Ecodiocese scheme. The Church Commissioners have 85000 acres of agriculture and 23000 acres of forestry. Cathedrals, TEIs and schools also have lands. Every encouragement was given to developing biodiversity with these.

Synod Code of Conduct. There is already a Code of Conduct which needs keeping under review, together with the complaints procedure. There were calls for more discipline in members' behaviour, and language especially on social media, this to be in members' public lives at all times. A recent survey of members has shown that more focus should be given to the Code but there is no need for disciplinary measures. It was agreed that the Code should be revised and that more members should contribute their thoughts.

The Future of Work. Diocese of Oxford. Following concerns about the development of AI and the perceived reduction in work available, this motion was to highlight the value of work. The Centre for Cultural Witness was referred to as source of information. Members commented on dignity and purpose, that one fifth of UK jobs are insecure, asylum seekers want to work and could contribute to the economy, lack of finances for ordinands, interns and lay workers produced some heartfelt complaints about the C of E taking advantage. The motion to ask employers to follow Fairwork principles [Fair Pay, Fair Conditions, Fair Contracts, Fair Management, Fair Representation] and for the Faith and Order Commission to publish theology was easily carried.

Racial Justice. Lord Boateng, Chair of Archbishop's Commission for Racial Justice, was again present for this important motion to update members following 'From Lament to Action'. The priority areas are governance, funding, data collection, good practice at all levels. Last year we had the 30th anniversary of Stephen Lawrence's murder, and the 75th Windrush anniversary. Comments were made that every diocese is in a different place; 2 dioceses have not started; we need to collect data to note improvements; there are more GMH suffragans but fewer Deans, Archdeacons etc.; GMH clergy feel disadvantaged and have health and well-being issues; they cannot progress in their careers. The Transatlantic Slave Trade and Contested Heritage in churches inhibit mission. The Church Buildings Council and Cathedrals Fabric Commission are seeking members. The Liturgical Commission is working on more diverse resources. TEIs are working on appropriate training. One third of pupils in church schools are GMH. All GMH members who wished to and were in the chamber were given the opportunity to speak in the debate and commented on the

lack of action on some points, the lack of consideration given to them for certain posts; institutional racism; white congregations should not refuse black priests; Rev Treena spoke about role models, easily available in the NHS but not in the Church which fails to see racial bias. As it is running out of money the Racial Justice project needs evaluation to see progress and whether all objectives have been met. On a whole Synod vote, it was carried [364 for and 2 abstentions] and further work to see how it should continue is necessary.

Bullying by Lay Officers. Ven Mark Ireland introduced this as A Private Member's Motion. There are no measures in place to prevent this. Removal and disqualification have been removed from the Churchwarden's Measure at the Government's insistence. Luke Miller, Prolocutor for the Clergy said that as an Archdeacon there are two approaches, charm and menace. Mark explained the many contacts he has had since this came onto the agenda. Some churches have a culture of bullying within PCCs and the congregation, indeed some parishes are priest breakers. It was suggested that offenders could be barred from Communion [Canon B16]; that they should be spoken to by the victim and the victim should take a witness; that trauma should be avoided, but that the Diocesan Bishop can excommunicate. In 2008 'Dignity at Work' was produced but clergy tend not to use the formal grievance procedure. Lay ministers can have their licences revoked. The motion to ask the Archbishop's Council to introduce legislative proposals for barring was carried.

Various Amendments to **Standing Orders** were carried, including when the bell is rung to alert members a vote is to be taken.

Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households. A report has been published, 'Love Matters', focussing on practical responses to 'Simpler, Humbler, Bolder, More Diverse'. This is recommended reading for Parishes, Deaneries and Dioceses. Working with evidence from 8 dioceses exploring the realities of family life the following recommendations were made:

Value families in all their diversity: support relationships throughout life: honour singleness and single person households: empower children and young people: build a kinder, fairer, more forgiving society.

Actions: maximise the protective effect of family: ensure that all loving relationships matter and are valued in everything we do: give every child the best possible start in life: tackle the societal issues which limit people's ability to flourish. An amendment which sought to make reference to reaffirming marriage as the preferred state was not passed as not all families have partners eg. widowed, single. This followed a powerful speech from a member who had lost his wife to cancer leaving him with 4 children, the youngest 6 months, which had affirmed his faith in the support of the Church.

Church Commissioner's response to Links to Transatlantic Slavery This motion was an explanation for the amount of reparation allocated to this issue recently and the justification for it. The history was explained with Queen Anne's Bounty 1704, which invested heavily in the South Sea Company which carried 34000 people across the seas. ++Justin apologised deeply for this. The Church Commissioners have allocated £100m over 9 years [1% of the endowment fund]. In those 9 years mission and ministry funding of £3.6 billion is to be allocated to the central church, including £300m to LInC and £25m to Racial Justice. The Slave Bible is at Lambeth Palace Library and was exhibited at the Evening Reception. It has 90% OT and 50% NT removed. Roy Swan, Ch Comm, from the USA had flown and explained that after WW2 the USA allocated 250b\$ to rebuild Europe and that hope overcame adversity. February is Black History month in the USA.

Parochial Fees Order. These are capped at 5% increase, although some complained inflation has gone down.

Chancel Repair Measure. The Church Commissioners have responsibility for 800 churches and this will now become their sole responsibility as far as Chancel Repair is concerned, and for Cathedrals. This will simplify land arrangements and disposals.

Reappointments to Archbishop's Council Rev Charlotte Cook and Joseph Diwakar.

Estates Evangelism, a lively introduction by Bishop Philip North reinforced by members' experiences of this evangelism. Deprived areas with multiple problems. 1300 parishes where estates are not served. Two thirds of under 18s live on estates and half adults do not have passports. 61% LInC money is not used in deprived areas. Difficulties in attracting priests and some people are illiterate, new pathways for ministry required. One parish priest was asked for work experience by police cadet, now has two more interested. Bristol has new Dean for Priority Communities, there is a Dean of Estates Ministry in Southwark. 'Faith in the City' has been forgotten. The motion called for more resources, dioceses to have this in their plans, re-examination of LInC funding, more leaders and priests with working class backgrounds in training. Well supported.

Clergy Pensions. Rev Ian Paul in a PM Motion called for restoration of pensions to their former value. The Clergy scheme gives up to half a stipend. The value of the Pension Fund has increased and the amount of pension that dioceses have to pay has been reduced so pensions could be increased. Two fifths of priests living on their stipends are only just managing. Pensioners have poorer experience. The motion called on the Archbishop's Council, Pensions Board and Church Commissioners to restore pensions to 2011 levels. Several illustrations of difficulties for single people, with housing rents rising, those without inherited wealth were detailed. This was passed.

Living in Love and Faith. It was revealed in this debate the Church of England Evangelical Council is advocating for positions that many believe would lead to schism. Previous arguments about the Doctrine of Marriage were again stated, as were those who will accept same sex couples. There is currently not a two thirds majority to pass new legislation. Bishop Martyn Snow asked for a 'pause to reset the agenda' and for reconciliation. He had 10 statements which he wished us to affirm. As the paper contained a table indicating that any solution to introducing prayers may be subject to legal action members were pleased to vote for a move to next business to wait for more explanations and the Guidance we have been waiting for.

Church Funds Measure. This motion is to allow the setting up of a new charitable body to hold existing funds without high costs. They are currently held in the CCLA and would be transferred to a Charity Authorised Investment Fund. £3bn of Cathedral, PCC and Diocesan funds is currently held in 6 funds. The Charity Commission would oversee these and they would not be subject to VAT. Passed.

War in Ukraine and Challenge to International Order. Ukraine's war of attrition, absence of any pause in the fighting, the involvement of religion and the challenges to liberal democracies are making this catastrophic for the future. The involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church has politicised the Church. Bishops are pressing for international law and order to be upheld. The Ecumenical guest from the Ukraine Orthodox Church in the UK thanked our country for taking in refugees, supporting the people and for maintaining relationships. The C of E is training Chaplains for Ukraine as it is the 'function of the Church at all costs to remain the Church' [+George Bell]. Draft legislation in Ukraine's Govt to limit religious organisations is making the country's Orthodox Church life and Freedom of Religion and Belief difficult. The Report was noted.

Private Member's Motion, Ordination after Divorce. This motion was unexpectedly brought forward. Currently ordinands who are divorced require a faculty where previous wives/husbands are contacted. This was supposed to be used rarely but is being used commonly. It has resulted in trauma for those abused by their partners and unfair treatment, as those who have had long term partners without marriage, do not have this. Clergy resent this intrusion into their private lives which brings up old wounds and often children are involved, sometimes in giving evidence. An amendment was moved to allow this investigation in exceptional cases and approved.

Farewells to Stephen Trott, note taker over many years and the Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler were given, the latter particularly commended for his work with young people. The death of Sir Patrick Cormack was announced.

Penny Allen GS 335