

Report on February 2025 General Synod Group of Sessions

General Synod met in London, at Church House, from 10th to 14th February.

I have served on General Synod since 2021. This group of sessions was long and hard work, but not because of the bishops' proposals for the next stage of the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF), which have dominated most previous Synod meetings I have attended. Instead we examined some significant legislation, and grappled with safeguarding and issues surrounding the appointment of diocesan bishops. The deep divisions the church is experiencing over PLF still loomed over us, however, and sometimes were carried into other debates, with some people seeing voting on different matters as proxy for views on PLF.

Safeguarding

In many ways, and unsurprisingly given the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, this was the 'safeguarding Synod'.

There was a debate on the Makin Report into the abuses of the late John Smyth, which resulted in a unanimously-approved motion in which Synod declared its repentance of 'failures of safeguarding' in the Church.

There was a more substantive debate on safeguarding independence, following the recommendations in last year's report by Professor Alexis Jay, "The Future of Church Safeguarding". A 'response group' of bishops and others was set up to consider the Jay report, and although the group could not reach a conclusion on a way forward, the lead bishop, Joanne Grenfell, expressed a clear preference for the most radical proposal, Model 4.

Model 4 included the establishment of two independent bodies: one responsible for delivering all Church safeguarding activities (currently managed by 85 separate charitable organisations in the national Church, dioceses and cathedrals), and the other responsible for providing scrutiny and oversight of safeguarding. Synod did not approve this option, despite strong arguments in favour from some survivors and victims of abuse, with many Synod members believing that it was over-complex and unprecedented, and concerned about creating unforeseen safeguarding problems - the practicalities of both models have not yet been developed.

A less radical option, 'Model 3', which transferred just the scrutiny function and part of the National Safeguarding Team into new independent bodies, was also rejected as an end goal. Instead, Synod voted for a compromise proposed by the Bishop of Blackburn, 'Model 3.5', which supported Model 3 as a short-term solution but which called for 'further work as to the legal and practical requirements necessary to implement model 4.' Press headlines suggesting that Synod had ignored 'expert advice' were wide of the mark; many safeguarding experts, including over 100 diocesan and cathedral safeguarding professionals, had expressed their concern about the viability of Model 4.

Appointment of diocesan bishops

Two long debates, each with several amendments tabled, had a bearing on how diocesan bishops are appointed. This followed concerns about the recent failures to appoint bishops for Carlisle and Ely. The first involved proposals from the House of Bishops to change Synod's standing orders for the Crown Nominations Commission (CNC) which makes diocesan appointments, so as to make it less likely that the CNC would fail to agree on a preferred candidate.

The bishops proposed excluding abstentions from the vote count, watering down to 60% the 2/3rds majority required, removing the secret ballot, and giving the person chairing the CNC (usually the relevant Archbishop) a casting vote. The proposals were defeated in votes by houses (where votes have to pass with bishops, clergy and laity), with particularly strong opposition from the House of Laity.

The bishops' second set of proposals were passed and have changed how diocesan Vacancy in See Committees (ViSCs) are appointed, with the goal of achieving 'a better representation of the diocese as a whole'. This had a bearing on the CNC process as ViSCs elect the diocesan representatives on CNCs.

The bishops have prevented more than two people from the same 'worshipping community' (ie electoral roll) being elected to the ViSC (and therefore the CNC), and have required at least two women (one lay and one clergy) to be put forward to the CNC. The former proposal will discriminate against larger parishes/churches and cathedrals, where most young people worship (despite the desire to improve the participation of young people), and also those parishes where there are existing ex officio ViSC members, eg members of General Synod.

There is a lack of clarity around the proposals to do with people who are authorised to minister in more than one parish (for example in multi parish benefices, or those with deanery or wider licenses), and one seemingly unforeseen result is that the elected members from Canterbury Diocese CNC, who will choose the new Archbishop of Canterbury, cannot now include any male clergy from the diocese at all.

Given these, and other, problems, I anticipate further amendments to come in the future. Usually legislation goes through a scrutiny process in a revision committee before it is enacted by General Synod, but Standing Orders (which were what were changed here) are not subject to the same process. Thankfully we do not have to navigate these choppy waters in this diocese in the immediate future as our Vacancy in See committee for this Triennium is already in place.

Living in Love and Faith (LLF)

Just one hour was allocated to a presentation by the Bishop of Leicester and questions. This was because, as explained in paper GS 2386, the bishops were still doing the theological work (mostly through the Faith and Order Commission, FAOC) needed to underpin the various parts of the LLF 'package', including the commendation of 'bespoke' (previously 'standalone') services of blessing for same-sex couples, the relaxation of rules which prevent clergy and ordinands contracting same-sex marriages, and the development of 'pastoral reassurance' for those opposed to the Prayers of Love and Faith through what has become styled as 'delegated episcopal ministry' (a form of shared episcopacy across regions).

The Bishop of Leicester said he could not even guarantee that proposals would be ready for the February 2026 group of sessions. Before then there will need to be further theological work and consultations with diocesan synods. Theological and doctrinal challenges include FAOC's scepticism, in the context of the Church's continued commitment to the doctrine of marriage (Canon B30), that 'a clear distinction between holy matrimony and civil marriage can withstand scrutiny.'

Other business

The rest of the Synod was taken up in part with some very detailed legislative business, including approval of a new Clergy Conduct Measure (for which I served on the Revision Committee) to replace the discredited Clergy Discipline Measure, introducing a new 'triage' system for complaints about conduct, distinguishing between grievances, allegations of misconduct and serious misconduct. In the most serious cases clergy will once again be liable to 'de-frocking' (or, in the technical language, being 'deposed from Holy Orders'). Some of the problems in recent notable safeguarding cases could have been avoided if CCM had been in place.

A new National Church Governance Measure, restructuring the national church organisational structure, passed its revision stage. And first consideration was given to a revised Mission and Pastoral Measure which governs how changes are made to pastoral ministry and church buildings. Both of these are substantial pieces of legislation which will make significant changes to how our church operates at a national and local level.

Debates were also held on racial justice, diocesan finances (where initial proposals for substantial increases in clergy stipends were floated), sports and wellbeing ministry, working class ministry and how to involve more young people in the work of General Synod.

All the papers from Synod are available here:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/governance/general-synod/groups-sessions-information/general-synod-february-2025>

Videos of the sessions can be viewed here, and you can find some members of our Diocesan Synod speaking in several debates:

<https://www.youtube.com/@TheChurchofEngland/search>

Do contact me if there's anything more you'd like to know about General Synod and please pray for your General Synod reps - the weight of our decision making hangs heavy on us, and we need the Lord's guidance and grace in all our reading, speaking, contributing and voting.

Amanda Robbie, General Synod Laity

February 2025