

Report on February 2023 General Synod group of sessions

There was great anticipation ahead of the General Synod group of sessions in London on 6-9 February given the much-publicised response from CofE bishops to the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) process. LLF and the bishops' proposals for the blessing of same-sex couples certainly attracted all the headlines and not a little controversy. But LLF was not the only item on the Synod agenda. There were also important debates on the cost-of-living crisis, dioceses supporting each other financially, ministerial education, safeguarding, parochial fees and Insurance Premium Tax, together with a 'Loyal Address' marking the accession of King Charles III. This was clearly the most significant group of sessions in this General Synod quinquennium (2021-26) to date.

Monday 6 February

The Archbishop of Canterbury opened the Synod with his *presidential address*. His speech was a call for unity. Justin Welby acknowledged the 'deep and passionately held differences' on sexuality and, in a use of syntax, called people as they debated the issue to 'speak Christian in word and deed'. The Bishop of London Sarah Mullally, as chair of the LLF Next Steps Group, gave a *presentation on LLF*. She explained that despite the many years of Shared Conversations and LLF there was still no consensus among the bishops on the nature of holy matrimony and whether the biblical and theological understanding of marriage could be extended to same-sex couples. The proposed draft Prayers of Love and Faith were an attempt to chart a middle course, offering (together with new Pastoral Guidance still to be written) pastoral accommodation to same-sex couples while leaving the Church's doctrine of holy matrimony unchanged. Invoking Philippians 2:4, Bishop Sarah urged Synod members 'not just to look to your own interests, but to the interests of others'.

The day finished with *Questions Part 1*, on subjects other than LLF. Unusually for Synod, the session managed to reach the end of the 142 questions (and supplementaries) asked.

Tuesday 7 February

A key feature of Tuesday morning was *Questions Part 2* on LLF. Bishop Sarah had a challenging time as she tried to respond to over 60 questions (and supplementaries) on the bishops' proposals, many of them hostile. She batted most of the questions back by saying that many of the issues would be dealt with in the not-yet published (or indeed written) Pastoral Guidance which will come to the next Synod in July. Later in the day there was *Group Work on LLF* in which Synod members broke up into twenty groups of 20-25 people to discuss the draft 'Prayers of Love and Faith', each group in the presence of a trained LLF facilitator and 2-3 bishops, who promised to report back on the discussions to their colleagues.

There was also a debate on *Resourcing Ministerial Formation*. There were details of a new funding strategy for Theological Education Institutions (TEIs) which would hopefully give TEIs greater financial stability. But a new maintenance system for ordinands was still under discussion given the complexities involved, including the difficulties in costing different modes of training.

Wednesday 8 February

Before the big LLF debate in the afternoon there was a debate on the **Cost of Living**. A motion addressed to the government and calling for 'policies that offer generous support to those who are falling into poverty and the organisations dedicated to supporting them' was unanimously approved. There was then approval of the **Draft Parochial Fees (Amendment) Order** which, for the rest of 2023, increased the parochial fees for weddings and funerals over their 2022 level by 5% rather than the much higher CPI figure of almost 10%.

Wednesday afternoon saw the beginning of the exhausting 8-hour debate on the bishops' motion in response to the **Living in Love and Faith** process. In summary, this offered an apology for the Church's treatment of LGBTQI+ people, welcomed the decision of the House of Bishops to replace the 1991 Issues in Human Sexuality statement with new Pastoral Guidance, welcomed the draft 'Prayers of Love and Faith' proposed by the College of Bishops for the blessing of same-sex couples subject to further refinement, and invited the House of Bishops to report back to Synod on the use of the prayers (once commended by the bishops) in five years' time.

The discussion was excellently chaired by Geoffrey Tattersall KC but Synod was unable to get through more than 19 of the 27 amendments originally tabled so the debate extended into Thursday.

Thursday 9 February

The **Living in Love and Faith** debate finished in the morning. An amendment, from Andrew Cornes (clergy representative from Chichester Diocese), which was not opposed by the Bishop of London and which thus had a substantive debate on the floor of Synod. It added an additional sub-paragraph to the bishops' motion and invited Synod to 'endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England'. This amendment, echoing the language in Canon B5 and elsewhere in the Canons, was arguably simply restating what the bishops had already declared in their position paper, backed up by some advice from Church House lawyers. The amendment was passed by narrow majorities in the Houses of Clergy and Laity and by 22-14 votes (with 4 abstentions) in the House of Bishops. Taken overall, the voting was 57% in favour of the bishops' motion, 41% against, with 2% abstaining. Excluding the bishops, the voting amongst the Clergy and Laity was 54% in favour and 44% against, with 2% abstaining.

A rather weary Synod finished its business on Thursday afternoon. The **Diocesan Stipends Funds (Amendment) Measure** was passed to allow wealthier dioceses to transfer monies from their stipends funds to more disadvantaged dioceses. There was an update on the Church's **governance review**, a presentation on **safeguarding** from the new National Director of Safeguarding, and a motion was passed calling on the government to exempt charities, including churches, from liability for **Insurance Premium Tax**. There were some other rather technical pieces of legislation which were considered and/or passed during the group of sessions, but explaining what they were about would require another three pages!

Roger Driver
February 2023