

General Synod Report
February Sessions 2017 (13th - 16th Feb)
Alison Coulter

As the link General Synod member for Winchester and Alresford Deaneries, I am writing this report to give a summary of the most recent General Synod sessions held in February. If you would like more detail, you can listen to most of the Synod debates at <https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england> and all of the papers can be found on the General Synod website: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/general-synod/agendas-and-papers/february-2017-group-of-sessions.aspx> I would be very happy to talk about any of these issues and my contact details are below.

There was a good deal of press coverage on the debate and vote on the Bishops' Report on Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations – but that was just a small part of the overall Synod sessions, so I hope this will give a flavour of the wide variety of areas and topics we discussed during 4 days in February.

1. The Archbishop of Canterbury opened Synod with a Presidential Address and spoke about the choice we have as we reimagine the future, whether we will be confident in faith, humble in service, taking Christ to the world or whether we will be people dominated by fear. He reminded us that we are called to be people of the cross at this time, God's people for our world.
2. Anniversary of the Reformation (GS2044) – A debate about whether to mark the 500th Anniversary of the European Reformation, and agreement that this is an important historical moment for our own protestant church and also offers a chance for understanding and reconciliation between all churches.
3. Preliminaries to Marriage (GS2045) – A debate about whether to change from Banns to civil certificate giving 'authority to marry'. A rich discussion about the burden of administration and the responsibility of giving authority for marriage versus the missional opportunity of building relationships with couples coming for marriage in a church. Synod voted against this measure, so current practice and banns will stay.
4. Other legislation, mostly around simplification of church law (but there is still a way to go in my opinion!) – I find much of this quite complex so here are just a few of the items discussed on Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning. Mission and Pastoral (GS2014) – Simplification of rules for church administration; Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction & Care of Churches (GS2031) – Clarification of care of church buildings; Statute Law (Repeals) Measure (GS2030) – Repeal of Laws which are no longer relevant. Pensions (Pre-Consolidation) (GS2032) – Tidying up of rules in advance of Widows and Clergy Pension Funds being combined. Phase II Simplification (GS2046) – Church Representation, Ecumenical and Ministers – helping Bishops to allow other denominations to preach in CofE churches. Draft Amending Canon No. 38 (GS2047) – removing requirement for services in all parish churches every Sunday. The Ecclesiastical Offices (Terms of Service) (Amendment) (GS2048) – enabling clergy to work on to age 75 (rather than 72) not to apply to Archbishops! The Safeguarding (Clergy Risk Assessment) Regulations (GS2050) – to establish common process across all Dioceses for assessing Safeguarding Risks of Clergy. All of these items were

approved by Synod. A memorable moment in a long afternoon of amending canons was when The Archdeacon of Bournemouth, Peter Rouch, started to sing to get his point across!

5. Draft Amending Canon No. 36 & Draft Amending Canon No. 37 (GS2029) – Synod agreed that clergy can be flexible in what they wear when leading worship, provided they agree this with their PCCs. There were some amusing moments in this debate including whether or not it is a health and safety risk to sing ‘Our God is a great big God’ in full robes! Rev Dudley Smith reminded us of the line in WC Dix’s hymn Alleluia Sing to Jesus - ‘robed in flesh, our great high Priest’ - which I found a moving reminder that Jesus himself did not choose to come in heavenly splendour, but as a human ‘unrobed’ – Philippians 2. Canon 37 refers to services for those who have committed suicide and it was agreed that the normal funeral service could be used.
6. Creation of Suffragan See for the Diocese of Leicester (GS2052) – Synod approved the creation of a new Area Bishop.
7. Fixed Odds Betting Terminals: Reduction of Maximum Stake (GS2054) – This item was brought by London Diocesan Synod, because of concern for the effect of gambling on their communities. There was a really passionate debate about the need to protect those most vulnerable in society and those with a gambling addiction. Synod agreed to protest to the Government about fixed odds betting machines, with a suggestion that the amount that can be bet at any one time is reduced to £2 (from £100) and that Local Government be allowed to restrict the number of terminals.
8. Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations: A Report from the House of Bishops (GS2055) - There was impassioned but respectful debate about the report, which is worth listening to, with a wide range of views expressed. A majority of the House of Clergy voted ‘not to take note’ of the report, and the House of Bishops and the House of Laity voted to ‘take note’. There were many reasons why people voted not to take note: some didn’t feel the report was the right approach, some didn’t think it went far enough in welcoming same sex couples, and others thought it went too far. The Archbishops have asked Diocesan Bishops to meet with their Synod Reps to hear about our desires for the way forward. This was not a vote about same sex marriage, but simply about the Bishop’s report and as such I feel the debate has been misrepresented by the media.
9. And last but not least - Setting God's People Free: Report from the Archbishops' Council (GS2056) asking that an action plan be drawn up to look at how best to empower and equip the 98% of the church who are lay people to be more effective at living out their faith. I helped to write this report, so I was disappointed that it was rather overshadowed by the previous evenings debate, but very pleased that there was overwhelming support for the report and the recommended next steps – Synod voted unanimously in favour. I continue to be part of the steering group for this work.

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