

## **General Synod Report July 2020**

On Saturday 11 July 2020, the General Synod did something new and unique in its history. It held its first Zoom meeting which at its height had over 430 attendees. As somebody who had never done Zoom at all until the Covid 19 lock-down, I consider Church house staff's efforts to have been very creditable as they tried to manage an enormous number of people literally across the length and breadth of our entire nation. Therefore, the occasional errors and mistakes should easily be forgiven.

We began with worship, which unfortunately was spoiled by the fact that somebody somewhere in the system had not turned off their microphone. We could hear them whispering while the Dean of Ripon Cathedral tried to lead us in contemplative worship.

The opening address was done by the new Archbishop of York and he spoke of his vision for the future. His desire is to consult widely as he looks at some form of restructuring and reshaping the Church of England. We must pray for him as this is a daunting task. It was good that there was a new emphasis on sharing. So the Archbishop of Canterbury also appeared briefly in this video along with the presentation of others.

We had a short time for reflection which I think many people took as an opportunity for refreshment and a coffee break. By now it was 11.45 a.m. and therefore we had one hour of questions. 131 had been tabled covering a wide range of topics but mostly concerning issues to do with safeguarding, our response to Covid 19, especially the closing of churches.

Everybody had received their answers and so people were trying to ask supplementals. Some of which had been submitted already and some of which were "done from the floor." This did not work particularly well and I am sad to say, some of the questioning was not done in the best spirit and led to some fractious exchanges.

We then paused for three quarters of an hour to have lunch and then had a presentation on Covid 19 by the Bishop of London, Rt. Rev. Sarah Mullally. I think that Bishop Sarah and her team have done extraordinarily well to respond rapidly to the unfolding situation that Covid 19 lockdown caused. Given the limitations in which they were working it is clear they have tried very hard to gather a good range of experts and given appropriate advice to the church. Most of the questions that followed this presentation seemed to reflect that.

It was now 2.45 p.m. and we had another break for fifteen minutes. Then we returned to question time. I wish I could say that they were a slight improvement on the morning session but sadly I cannot. We did cover nearly 100, which is good, as we normally do about 80 at a conventional Synod. We then had a brief reflection on scripture in the hope that we could go into break out groups to discuss it but unfortunately the technology did not allow that. We then had the final worship and concluded.

Perhaps the most important thing about this synod is not what took place, but what is proposed to take place. In September they are trying to arrange a meeting of the General Synod at Church House which will have sufficient numbers to be able to pass legislation. Obviously would not be the full General Synod because there would have to be a great deal of social distancing. If this meeting can be properly arranged and is quorate, its purpose would be to ask parliament to agree to our legislation so that the November synod could be by Zoom. It would spread over several days so that various important reports can be presented to General Synod. The only one we can be sure of at this stage is 2021 Archbishops' Council budget.

Some synod members have already expressed the view by social media that there must be a sunset clause in such legislation, i.e., that having Zoom meetings would not be a permanent feature of General Synod. Such legislation would only be used in times of extreme crisis such as the present outbreak. As most of the people who have expressed a view feel that while it is essential to have Zoom meetings for General Synod now, democracy would not be well served if we were always to meet by Zoom, even though it would save the church a significant amount of money if we did.

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