

## General Synod Report

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The shortened group of sessions of the General Synod began today at Church House in Westminster. The sessions are ending on Wednesday afternoon to make way for the enthronement of Rowan Williams on Thursday. Dr Williams was present for the start of the sessions today and both led the prayers and spoke to the Synod. As was to be expected he was given generous applause by many of the members of the Synod, although far less exuberant than might have been. Others, being mindful of the scriptural teaching not to welcome false teachers, declined to join in.

The Synod was told at the beginning of the sessions that the Clergy Discipline Measure has now, after a very long wait, been 'deemed expedient' by the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament. This will now go for approval by the House of Commons and the Lord's which is likely to be a formality.

As is customary Synod business proper began with a debate on the agenda. There were two particular issues which became the focus of this item.

The first has to do with the composition of the **Crown Appointments Commission**. In a debate on this last November there was a motion to change its name. Curiously Stephen Trott was allowed to put down an amendment to this motion requiring that the number of members of the CAC (or whatever its new name will be) appointed by the relevant Diocese should be increased from 4 to 8. This was badly handled and there was no debate but the Synod actually agreed to the change. This put the Synod managers into a spin and led to the debate on the main motion (the name change) being adjourned. In the intervening months attempts have been made to find a backdoor method to undermine the decision of the Synod (which is nothing new). However, the Business Committee has declined all attempts at such manipulation. Hence today there was some debate about the rightness or wrongness of letting democracy run its course.

The second issue was that many members of Synod felt that there should be an opportunity for the Synod to again debate the **Iraqi crisis**. It appears that there will now be time made available tomorrow for this to happen. It is felt to be important that at such a critical time the Church is seen to be discussing issues

that matter rather than just in-house things. Jonathan Frai, from Kiev, also pointed out that many overseas think that the Churches in the UK are all united in opposing war, which is simply not the case. His hope was that a debate would make it plain that many feel war is now necessary in order to protect the weak and 'set free the captives'.

Towards the end of last year a Government initiative forced the Church to think about issues to do with the **employment rights of Clergy**. Necessarily at short notice the Archbishops' Council set up a review group and a response was made to the government. The implications and impact of legislation that may follow are potentially enormous. It could alter dramatically the future shape of the Church of England. The Synod was given an opportunity to comment on that response and therefore offer some direction to the Group in the work it is being asked to undertake. The first phase of the work undertaken is to look at providing protection for clergy who are currently under licence only and therefore in effect have no safeguards at all. For example, a Curate, Priest-in-Charge or Team Vicar, who opposes their Diocesan Bishop for biblical reasons, can find that their license will not be renewed and they have no recourse whatsoever. Providing safeguards for such people is clearly desirable and is being forced on the Church by the Government. However, the second phase, not required by the Government, will be to look at the other side, where clergy have Freehold and are therefore very difficult to remove from post. Everyone acknowledges that there are instances where clergy with Freehold are not suitable for their post and there needs to be greater freedom to remove them. It is possible that the new Clergy Discipline Measure will help in this. However, as was apparent in the Synod debate, there are many who now see Freehold as an anachronism. This is particularly true because some Dioceses are desperate to re-organise parishes and find the Freehold a barrier. However, evangelicals have always prized the Freehold. In particular because it gives clergy the freedom to be critical of the hierarchy without fear of losing their post and also, if necessary to teach hard truths in their parishes. Freehold also prevents over-zealous Bishops and Dioceses from believing that they can dictate patterns of ministry. And Freehold is also bound up with Patronage and with issues such as the focus of the Church and the non-hierarchical nature of much of the polity of the Church. All these things will have to be addressed in any review. This is some way off, but Freehold is very definitely in the sights of some.

Despite all the efforts that went into the production of Common Worship the Synod today approved two anomalous services. The **Series 1 Marriage and Funeral services** are actually a throwback to the 1928 Prayer Book Revision. These services have survived the passage of time and been re-authorized by the Bishops, the old General Assembly and the General Synod on a regular basis. Now they have been re-authorized without time limit. The Marriage service is relatively uncontentious – though it represents a modification of the BCP – to weaken some of the statements made there and to provide for women not to obey (both of

which have been a feature of the ASB and Common Worship). This service was passed with only a handful of us voting against. More problematic is the Funeral Service which whilst modest in its intercession for the departed is nevertheless entirely misleading in what it is declaring about the state of the deceased and about what is happening at a funeral service. Sadly most of the arguments in favour of the service were about allowing for diversity in the Church – apparently the prime virtue of the day is to allow people to hold erroneous views without trying to correct them! About one sixth of the clergy and about one fifth of the laity voted against but this was not sufficient and now we are stuck with the 1928 services until the Synod is sufficiently reformed to undo what it has done.

Final business of the day was **question time**. As always these covered a wide range of issues and the answers were generally helpful and informative. Of particular interest is that a number of questions show a growing impatience that whilst parish posts are being cut no such pruning is taking place amongst Bishops and other 'dignitaries'. There is pressure to find ways of addressing this, perhaps by merging Dioceses (which would have knock on effects in terms of administration and also such things as reducing the overall size of the General Synod).

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