

General Synod Report

Date : 12 February 2004 (Thursday)

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Business on the fourth day of this Group of Sessions (Thursday 12 February 2004) began with the final approval of the Draft Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure. These measures are a regular feature and usually not contentious.

The Draft Stipends (Cessation of Special Payments) Measure generated a bit more heat, although not much. The special payments in question are technically 'guaranteed annuities'. In 1976 the Church of England consolidated and equalised the system of payments to clergy. The assets of many parishes had previously been used to pay the stipends of their own clergy. In lieu of this the Commissioners gave a guarantee that a payment would be made from the income of the funds transferred to all these parishes. Under this new Measure that guarantee will be broken. There was some resistance to this change on the grounds that it is breach of trust. There was also an attempt to allow the funds released to be used for any purpose but this was rejected and the Synod decided that the money should only be used to finance ministry.

The lesson - you can't trust the Church of England to keep its word!

The remaining business of the morning was the revision of the Ordinal. This is a fairly modest development from that in the ASB and was criticised by some for being too modest. The new services do make a clearer distinction between Deacons, Priests (Presbyters) and Bishops but in doing so reflect a distinction between the latter two that is not Anglican, nor for that matter Catholic. Synod members (and anyone else) can send written submissions to the Revision Committee by 15 March.

As an adjunct to the ordinal Synod was asked to begin revising the Canons to reflect some of the changes proposed in the new Ordinal. In particular this would have discontinued the practice of Archdeacons presenting candidates for ordination. Also it would have removed the requirement of Bishops making the Declaration of Assent publicly at their ordination - though they still have to do this at Installation. In the event, and surprisingly the Synod rejected the motion completely.

In the afternoon the Rt Hon Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for International Development addressed the Synod on the subject of responding to HIV/AIDS. This was followed by a time of questions from members of the Synod to which Mr Benn responded. After this the Synod debated a motion HIV/AIDS which was eventually passed without opposition, although only about a third of the membership was present and voting.

Next on the agenda came the Daily Lectionary and Calendar. This is not controversial although more than one person wanted to cut out some passages from the lectionary because people are embarrassed by them. There is a case for saying that where churches regularly have visitors to weekday services some bible passages are likely to be incomprehensible but the tone of the contributions also indicated that people would rather that the passages were not in the Bible at all - the requirement that women be silent in churches was particularly mentioned.

Final business of the day was the Clergy Conditions of Service report. This process was in response to the government requirement that the Church provide adequate employment protection to all clergy. The initial phase of the work was to look at clergy without freehold. The tension was whether clergy would end up being employed and if so by whom. In the even the report advocates extending employment rights to all clergy whilst still making them office holders that involves the concept of 'common tenure'. This was generally well received as a creative response and will now go forward for legislation.

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