

General Synod Report Saturday in York

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Composition of General Synod etc.

The Synod considered a series of items to do with revising the composition of the Synod. These were the final stage of a long process and as such required a division by houses (bishops, clergy and laity voting separately) with a 2/3rds majority in each house. The major impact on the Synod of these changes will be a reduction in the size of the Synod from 571 to 468. However, the House of Bishops has only been reduced by 1 (the Bishop of Dover was added a couple of years ago as the first change and now two suffragan Bishops will be removed). Therefore the balance of the Synod, and in particular the lay representation on the Synod has been reduced. However, the great need was to reduce costs and each place cut should save over £1,000 per year.

Retired Clergy

One other significant change is that retired clergy, some of whom can be voted onto Deanery Synod, will be able to vote for and stand in elections to the house of clergy of the Synod.

Other legislation considered in the morning:

The parochial fees (there being some debate about how much churches should charge for marriage)

The final approval of the proposal to cut the 'guaranteed annuities' (the last relic of the fact that clergy were always paid locally and assets largely held locally until 1974)

Minor changes to the Pastoral Measure and a collection of other miscellaneous provisions.

Clergy Discipline

Synod gave consideration to a report to initiate the process for a new Clergy Discipline (Doctrine) Measure to replace the 1963 Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure.

It became clear that many are very uneasy with the very idea of boundaries being enforced as to what theological views a clergyman in the Church of England. Others felt the 1963 Measure, which is virtually ineffective is sufficient.

Two amendments tried to change the number of people on the Diocesan Synod who can initiate a complaint. This was not the proper place in the process to do this and both were lost but one had quite a lot of support.

When it came to the final vote this was requested and permitted by houses.

The Bishops voted in favour by 27 votes to 12 (although they had apparently been more split at their own earlier meeting).

The Laity voted in favour by 164 votes to 51

but the Clergy voted against by 103 votes to 99.

Therefore, the motion was lost and the disciplining of clergy for matters of doctrine or ceremonial will continue under the ineffectual 1963 Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure.

What this shows is that more than 3/4 of the laity wanted the Clergy to be accountable for what they teach, but the clergy wish to be unaccountable to anyone.

Marriage Law

The report from the Marriage Law Working Group was intended to elicit from the Synod its views about a number of possible changes to marriage law.

An amendment to the main motion was put in order to include within the scope of the review the introduction of the civil registration of all marriages so that someone to be married in the Church of England would need to go through the civil registrar for the preliminaries and the actual registration of the marriage. This was defeated but only by 161 votes to 146.

A second amendment from one of the Review Group and with their approval was designed to discover whether the Synod was willing to consider a free-for all; that is that any couple could be married in any church. The alternative which the Group had proposed is to allow a couple to marry in any church to which they can demonstrate a connection.

On a show of hands this vote was too close to call. There was therefore a count of the Synod and the amendment was passed by 200 votes to 185. However, standing orders allow for a division by houses should a sufficiently large number of members request it. Such a division was requested and granted.

On the division the vote was narrowly lost in each of the three houses.

Bishops - For 14, against 15

Clergy - For 88, against 89

Laity - For 97, against 104.

Thus, in the division the total votes were 199 for and 208 against.

Two further amendments were rejected and the Review Group was left to interpret the various decisions in order to make some sensible proposals. What was clear was that there was a desire for change.

There was no time for the debate on **Alternative Sources of Funding** for theological training.

The evening was devoted to **questions**. Sadly, as ever, the answers to some important questions, such as the way the report Issues in Human Sexuality is being interpreted by Bishops, were not answers at all but just evasion.

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