

The General Synod has rejected moves to end the legal requirement to read banns for couples intending to marry in church services.

Members voted against a Private Member's Motion brought by Rev Stephen Trott, from Peterborough Diocese, calling for draft legislation to be drawn up to transfer 'ecclesiastical preliminaries', the legal paperwork currently carried out by Church of England clergy before a church wedding, to civil registrars.

The motion called for a similar system to the one in operation in Scotland since 1977, when banns were replaced by a Marriage Schedule issued by the civil registrar.

Rev Trott told the General Synod that administering banns was 'fraught with difficulties' and a cause of 'great concern and even stress' to clergy.

Clergy should be concerned with marriage teaching and preparation and not the 'heavy burden' of a legal role, he said.

"In Synod we have made considerable progress towards redirecting all our efforts and energy into intentional evangelism, renewal and reform," he said.

"Here is an opportunity to simplify an ancient tradition by which we have become hidebound and in the process to lift the burden of the law from wedding couples and from the clergy and indeed from our diocesan registrars."

But the General Synod also heard from members who said the reading of banns presented significant opportunities for mission and evangelism.

Ven Cherry Vann, Archdeacon of Rochdale, said: "The Church of England conducts around 45,000 weddings a year, this means we have the potential to have direct contact with 90,000 people, largely in the 18 to 45 age group, the very group that we particularly struggle to engage with.

"The vast majority of those weddings are done by banns. This gives us a real opportunity to make connections, to build relationships and to demonstrate something of God's love to the couples who come to us through our care and concern."

An earlier amendment to Rev Trott's motion, calling for the Archbishops' Council to draw up draft legislation which 'greatly simplifies' the current system of ecclesiastical preliminaries was also narrowly defeated by the General Synod.

The publication of banns involves reading aloud during a service on three Sundays a declaration that the couple intend to marry and requiring anyone who knows a reason in law why the couple may not marry to declare this.

Currently the large majority of weddings conducted in Church of England parishes involve the reading of banns.

The General Synod voted by Houses on the Private Member's Motion (unamended) brought by Rev Trott. House of Bishops in favour: 10, against 16, zero abstentions; clergy in favour 74, against 87, zero abstentions; House of Laity, in favour 79, against 81, 7 abstentions. On Rev Patterson's amendment 146 voted in favour, 148 against, and there were 13 abstentions

Here is the full text of the motion and amendment put to the General Synod

The Revd Stephen Trott (Peterborough) to move:

That this Synod, noting the Registration of Marriages Regulations 2015 and the growing burden and complexity of the legal requirements imposed on members of the clergy who conduct weddings in the Church of England, invite the Archbishops' Council to bring forward draft legislation to replace ecclesiastical preliminaries to marriage by universal civil preliminaries, such as those which have been in operation in Scotland since 1977, when banns were replaced by a Marriage Schedule issued by the civil registrar.

The Revd Neil Patterson (Hereford) to move as an amendment:

Leave out all the words after "draft legislation" and insert "which greatly simplifies the current system of ecclesiastical preliminaries in order to reduce the administrative burden on clergy whilst retaining so far as possible the one-stop-shop and pastoral benefits of the local arrangement of marriages.

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