

GENERAL SYNOD

**DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION:
REVIEW OF THE WORKINGS OF THE GENERAL SYNOD**

Background Paper from the London Diocesan Synod

'That this Synod request the Archbishops' Council and the Business Committee to set in motion a review of the workings of the Synod and to propose alternatives to the Parliamentary model currently used, the review to include consideration of:

- a. the frequency and length of Groups of Sessions*
- b. the ways in which debate takes place and decisions are made*
- c. whether, in the light of recent changes in the democratic structures of local government and other public bodies, the current synodical framework and representative structures are still fit for purpose.'*

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Matthew 7:3-5

Summary

1. This motion seeks to start a process to consider what might be done to improve the way that General Synod operates and to make it more accessible. Its purpose is to see whether we can, and should, make changes in order to serve God better.

Introduction

2. This motion is here because three years ago a parish priest looked at General Synod from the outside and was frustrated. He saw a place where complex and sensitive matters were debated in a parliamentary way in which arguments were won, but not settled, by majority. He saw a place where party groups functioned in opposition to one another, questioning each other's legitimacy to be truly Christian. He saw a place that was disproportionately old, affluent, white and male that did not reflect the population at large.

3. This parish priest felt called to make a change and he started with an article in a newspaper¹. He shouldn't have had chance. His first attempt was dismissed by the London Diocesan Synod with an almost unanimous vote against. And that should have been that. Except it wasn't.
4. That priest went away and started again. He worked up a motion for his PCC who took it to their Deanery Synod and at the end of the debate they supported him. Then, before it could be debated at the Diocesan Synod our parish priest was called to the episcopate and left London.
5. As a result, the second time that this issue was discussed by the London Diocesan Synod should have gone no better than the first. During the debate a number of experienced and respected General Synod representatives, from a variety of churchmanships, stood up to explain why they believed that this was a bad idea. And, as before, that should have been that. Except it wasn't.
6. The spirit moved. Amendments were passed. London voted and here we are.

“alternatives to the Parliamentary model currently used”

7. When we are elected General Synod we literally to tick boxes to define which church background we come from. Even without that when certain people stand up many have already categorised them as Liberals or Conservatives or Catholics or WATCH or EGGS or...Is there anything we can change so that we stand to speak we all simply consider ourselves Christians?

“the frequency and length of Groups of Sessions”

8. Annual leave is precious. Family time is precious. Time for fellowship is precious. Time with friends is precious. Time to support charities is precious. Time to do nothing is precious.
9. The frequency and length of meetings has an impact on who can afford the time to stand for General Synod. As at November 2010 62% of the house of Laity were aged 60 or over (compared to around 22% of the population)².
10. The work of General Synod is important. The decisions deserve proper discussion. Important debates often end without people being able to speak. We need to get to know each other and understand each other.
11. Synod involves a commitment of time. What should that be? Can changes to the way that we manage our time encourage a greater diversity of people to stand?

¹ *Expand the electorate and meet once a year*, Church Times 19 November 2010

² General Synod figures from answer to Q24 at February 2011 Group of Sessions. Population figures taken from England and Wales ONS figures from 2011 census

“the ways in which debate takes place and decisions are made”

12. From the outside, on occasion, we can seem to be rude and poor examples of Christians. We have red lights, points of order, standing orders, divisions by houses and many other elements designed to help us avoid falling into anarchy.
13. We need some process and order. What should that be?

“whether, in the light of recent changes in the democratic structures of local government and other public bodies, the current synodical framework and representative structures are still fit for purpose”

14. There is much that is involved in the life of the church. What governance systems and processes best support the mission of the church?

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

Matthew 20:25-27

Q&A

15. **This is just about women bishops /homosexuality /abortion/marriage /[pet cause], isn't it?** This is not about any issue. It can't be, as any changes will likely take time to implement. It came up through the grass roots in response to a general concern not a specific one.
16. **There's no substance here. Where are the specific recommendations?** This motion started life with very specific recommendations, but London Diocesan Synod decided to ask General Synod for a more open review. Therefore the purpose of this motion is to initiate a process to determine what, if any, changes should be made. Any specific ideas can be considered through that.
17. **We are bound by Westminster, how can we do anything meaningful?** The law can be changed. If we think that the law is not helping us do God's work then we should seek to have it amended
18. **Any change will take a long time.** So it might. That is not a reason not to start.
19. **This will lead to [a change I think is wrong].** This should mark the start of a process that will allow changes to be debated. If there is agreement that they should be taken forward they will be. To not start a conversation because we may not like the answer can not be right.

20. **What has this got to do with mission?** The way that General Synod operates should support mission. The review will help to ensure that we do so.
21. **This will take up too much of Synod's time.** The proposal is that this process will be led by the Business Committee who will be able to ensure that it is balanced with the needs of other issues.
22. **Haven't we done this before?** Almost certainly. And we will do it again. We will need to proclaim our faith afresh in each generation. General Synod will need to change to support that.
23. **Why now? There is so much else that needs Synod's attention at the moment. Don't we have more important things to do?** There is never a time when we are not dealing with important issues. That there will never be a perfect time is not a reason to delay.
24. **Where is God in all of this?** "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." Matthew 18:20. God is, and should be, at the heart of our lives and this work. This review will help us to ensure that it is so.
25. **This is going to be expensive.** Depending on what it concluded this could end up with more, or less, spent on governance. That will be part of the considerations for what we take forward.
26. **Synod isn't broken. What are you trying to fix?** Determining that there are no problems may be what this work concludes. However there is a grassroots view that changes are needed so we should look at ourselves thoroughly.
27. **The issue is too wide. There will be too much that will need to be changed.** Trying to make and debate a series of potentially related changes runs the risk that the complete picture and any interlinked issues are not properly considered.
28. **Is this about the recent Article 7 and 8 references to the Dioceses?** This motion started in 2010 before the outcome of any of the Article 7 and 8 references were known.