

**GENERAL SYNOD****Guildford Diocesan Synod Motion: PROTECTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ONLINE EXPOSURE TO PORNOGRAPHY**

... to move on behalf of the Guildford Diocesan Synod:

‘That this Synod:

- (a) Acknowledge that our children and young people are suffering grave harm from free access to online pornography and that there is currently no legal requirement for pornography sites to have in place age verification systems to prevent children from having access to those sites.
- (b) Ask Her Majesty’s Government to use best endeavours to secure the passage and coming into force of legislation requiring pornographic sites to have in place age verification systems preventing access by people under the age of 18.
- (c) Recommend more social and educational programmes to increase awareness of the harms of pornography, including self-generated sexually explicit images.’

**Summary**

This motion emerged from a grass-roots concern within the Diocese of Guildford about the harm being caused to children and young people by unrestricted access to online pornography. Attempts to have legal protections put in place have been ongoing for at least a decade but, to date, have come to nothing. As a result of growing concern, and the lack of significant legislative progress being made, at the instigation of the Leatherhead Deanery Synod, the motion was passed by the Guildford Diocesan Synod.

Since the passing of the motion, the Online Safety Bill has been placed before Parliament and is currently at the Committee stage. If passed, the proposed legislation will go some way to addressing the problems. However, legislation introduced in 2018 which was designed to require age verification for access to commercial porn sites never came into effect. Therefore, the need for the motion to be passed by General Synod now remains as strong as it has always been. The motion acknowledges the current problem, asks the Government to take action and recommends programmes to increase awareness of the harms of pornography.

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**Background**

1. What access to pornography is doing to children and young people and to our society is a great unspoken tragedy of our day.
2. Vast quantities of pornography are widely available online for free and with no age check, and the scale of access to pornography by children and young people is astounding. A survey taken at a school just before lockdown in 2020 showed that 78% of sixth formers said they had seen porn in the last week. At a Christian camp later the same week, the figure was 73%, some of it viewed within the last 24 hours, i.e., while at the camp.<sup>1</sup> A

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<sup>1</sup> Premier Christianity Magazine, May 2021 (<https://www.premierchristianity.com/what-porn-users-need-to-know/4274.article>)

BBC Panorama report in September 2021 revealed that over half of eleven to thirteen-year olds have seen pornography.<sup>2</sup> A House of Commons report was already warning in 2016 that children of primary school age were accessing hard core pornography.<sup>3</sup>

3. Such access, combined with widespread sharing by children and young people on social media, has contributed to the sexualization of the young and exposed them to a burden of knowledge which they are often ill-equipped to bear. The situation is made even more serious by the fact that the sort of pornography being accessed largely depicts and normalizes sexual violence against, and the submission of, girls and women.<sup>4</sup> This is having an undoubted effect: the Panorama report disclosed that reports to police in England and Wales of child-on-child abuse (which includes actions from unwanted touching to rape) had more than doubled in two years, from 7,866 incidents in the year ended March 2017 to 16,102 incidents in the year ended March 2019 (there were fewer reports in the following two years, but this was probably due to lockdown) One in ten of the alleged abusers was aged ten or under.
4. Access to pornography means that a distorted and harmful view of what constitutes normal sexual relations is being absorbed by each new generation of children and young people. This is placing pressure on young boys and girls to conform to stereotypes of domination on the one hand and submission and degradation on the other, and is creating a wider culture of abusive attitudes towards girls and women.
5. Attempts to have legal protections put in place have been going on for at least a decade. Most recently, Barnardo's and 13 other children's charities including the NSPCC sent an open letter to Nadine Dorries, the Culture Secretary, calling for age verification for pornography sites, and the Children's Commissioner has published a report which also calls for such age verification.<sup>5 6</sup> A law requiring age verification for access to commercial porn sites was meant to come into effect in 2018 but it never did for reasons having to do with bureaucratic delay and then a changed approach by the government.<sup>7</sup>

### **The current legal position**

6. There are at present no laws in place regulating access to pornography by children and young people, but a new bill, the Online Safety Bill (OSB), is currently being considered by Parliament. It seeks, among other things, to regulate social media platforms by imposing a duty of care on them to make sure that children and young people are not exposed to harmful content.
7. In its initial form, the OSB covered only social media sites where users upload pornography for the purposes of sharing it with other members of the site, and it did not place any restrictions on commercial pornography sites. However, in response to pressure from children's organisations (see above), the government has also now

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<sup>2</sup> [BBC iPlayer - Panorama - Who's Protecting Our Kids?](#)

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Report on Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools (12 September 2016).

<sup>4</sup> [Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography | The British Journal of Criminology | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/barnardos-and-other-charities-call-government-protect-children-online-pornography>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/interim-findings-on-governments-commission-on-online-peer-on-peer-abuse/>

<sup>7</sup> Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017.

included a proposed new section (clause 68) that requires commercial pornography sites to restrict access by those under the age of 18.

8. While it may appear that the problem of access to online pornography by children and young people is now being dealt with, there remain significant obstacles in the way. It is likely that there will be resistance to the new restrictions on the grounds of the right to privacy, since people accessing pornography online will probably now be required to provide some form of identity. There may also be resistance from the pornography industry itself (although some have indicated that as long as all are equally regulated they will not object). Furthermore, there are other difficulties with the OSB, such as freedom of speech issues, which must still be resolved. All in all, it is not clear what form the OSB will finally take or how long it will take to come into effect. It is therefore vital that pressure should be maintained on the government to bring effective restrictions into effect as soon as possible.

### **Motivation**

9. Children and young people are part of God's creative plan (Genesis 1:28). Children and young people are gifts from God to families (Psalm 127:3). Children and young people need nurture and guidance (Proverbs 22:6). Children and young people need to be led in the ways of the Lord (Proverbs 29:17). Vulnerable children and young people need special care (Zechariah 7:10). Children and young people need protection (Luke 17:1-2).
10. It is part of the Church's vocation to voice its concerns regarding the physical and spiritual degradation of children. Their safeguarding is of utmost importance. Also, the fourth Mark of Mission reminds us to transform unjust structures, and this applies to the exploitation in the pornography industry coupled with the physically, psychologically, and spiritually unhealthy messages it promotes. Children and young people deserve to be taught that love should be the primary foundation for intimate relationships. Pornography is antithetical to the maxim of Philippians 4:8, to feed our souls with 'whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things' (NIV).

### **Motions of the Leatherhead Deanery Synod and the Guildford Diocesan Synod**

11. The Leatherhead Deanery Synod discussed the above situation at its meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2021, and voted in favour of presenting a motion at the next meeting of the Guildford Diocesan Synod on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2021.
12. Following a debate at the Diocesan Synod in November, further work was done on the wording of the motion in consultation with the team at Church House Westminster.
13. At its meeting on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, the Guildford Diocesan Synod approved the following motion with an overwhelming majority:

That the Diocesan Synod request the General Synod to:

- a) Acknowledge that our children and young people are suffering grave harm from free access to online pornography and that there is currently no legal requirement for pornography sites to have in place age verification systems to prevent children from having access to those sites.

- b) Ask Her Majesty's Government to introduce legislation requiring pornographic sites to have in place age verification systems preventing access by people under the age of 18.
  - c) Recommend more social and educational programmes to increase awareness of the harms of pornography, including self-generated sexually explicit images.
14. Given that the OSB is currently at the Committee stage in Parliament, the word "*introduce*" in b), above, has been replaced by the words "*use best endeavours to secure the passage and coming into force of*" in the motion before General Synod.

The Rev. Charleen Hollington, Member of Leatherhead Deanery Synod, Guildford

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