

GENERAL SYNOD

Church of Ireland General Synod 2023

Tom Woolford | Diocese of Blackburn | Synod Number 070

The Church of Ireland General Synod met in person in Wexford, Diocese of Down and Dromore, on the 12th and 13th May 2023. Further remote sessions, facilitated over Zoom, were tabled for the evenings of Tuesday 16th and Thursday 18th. I was asked by the Appointments Committee to represent the Church of England as one of the Church of Ireland's ecumenical guests, which invitation it was my honour to accept. I wish to thank the Archbishops, Bishops, members of Synod and in particular my host Dorcas for their warm hospitality.

Though there are many differences in the composition, working, and culture of the Church of Ireland's General Synod compared to that of its sister church in England, the differences are minor and the similarities considerable. A lot of the current concerns, priorities, and new initiatives in the Church of Ireland are shared, or have close counterparts, in our national Church. Speeches and motions on creation care, increasing ethnic diversity in church leadership, nascent models of pioneer ministry, robust and transparent safeguarding procedures, concern for clergy wellbeing, and the increased burden of administrative compliance in parochial ministry were redolent of those made in our chamber. The continuing effects of the war in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis (as acute over the Irish Sea as in England) featured in several of the debates as well.

There was nothing of heated controversy on the agenda. Most of the bills and motions debated by the synod were common sense amendments, clarifications, and corrections; with very little or no debate necessary before members were content to vote them through. These included changes to vestry (like electoral roll) membership forms to remove duplication, and giving incumbents the responsibility to make sure notice of the annual meeting is 'widely communicated' rather than specifying this must be done by affixing a notice to the door of the church. The Church of Ireland's Covenant with the Methodist Church concerning the interchangeability of ministry on a permanent office-holding basis was clarified to permit expressly what was implicit in the Covenant – namely the permissibility of the reception of ministry on an *occasional* basis (with the Ordinary's consent). Other modest changes included the removal of a ceiling on annual increases to pensions and child dependency allowances in view of the high rate of inflation of recent years. A couple of liturgical changes were also made, updating the Prayer Book in the wake of Her Late Majesty's demise, and fixing Remembrance Sunday for the second Sunday in November.

Two motions and a bill merit further brief comment. Motion 5, concerning the tenure of Archdeacons, was interesting. Recognising that an archdeacon's working relationship with his or her diocesan bishop is of paramount importance for effective leadership, collaboration, and ministry; motion 5 proposed continuing work on three possibilities for revising archdeacons' tenure. Under option A, an archdeacon's tenure would elapse when the appointing bishop retired or moved on; option B would appoint archdeacons on a fixed term (which could be renewed); and option C would appoint an archdeacon to a limited

GENERAL SYNOD

term, the length of which would be decided at the time of appointment. In the Church of Ireland, I gather, archdeacons remain also parish priests – so the role works out somewhere between that of an Area Dean (which in our polity is in the bishop's gift) and that of an English archdeacon. The Synod voted for the review process to continue and bring forward a preferred option.

Bill 3 was the only vote which was both formally counted, and narrowly lost. At present, a lay person may be elected to General Synod to represent a diocese in which they are not registered as a vestry member (equivalent to electoral roll) of a parish; and a beneficed or licensed clergy person can represent a diocese in which they are not even resident. Bill 3 proposed reforming the rules such that only those resident in or licensed to a given diocese can represent it on General Synod. Opponents cautioned against any curb on the freedom of dioceses to elect whom they so chose for General Synod, and the vote fell narrowly.

Finally, motion 9 proposed commissioning a review of clergy tenure. The existing canons of clergy tenure do not, it averred, take into account occasions of pastoral breakdown in a parish but where no ecclesiastical offence has been committed and no formal complaint could therefore be justified. The possibility of reviewing the rules of tenure so that a bishop had the power to remove or transfer the incumbent in such situations is within the remit of the consultation being proposed. The terms of reference also included less contentious reviews of the tenure of a Priest in Charge, Bishop's Curate, Pioneer Minister, and Chaplain; and the (related) concept of tied housing. The text of the Bill insisted that the proposed review would be cognisant of the benefits of independence, security, and freedom to hold theological views across the spectrum of the Church of Ireland that the current system allows; and from the floor of synod, the Bishop of Tuam, Limerick and Killaloe (proposing the Bill) promised that any such review of clergy tenure must include a reciprocal review of bishops' tenure. It was to this debate that I contributed a short speech, raising the possibility of such a measure that facilitated the removal of incumbents without their committing any offence being weaponised by disaffected lay people for reasons of personal animus or theological difference. I mentioned a Private Member's Motion and forthcoming review of the Church Representation Rules in our church that proposed new measures to tackle the bullying of clergy by lay people and suggested developments in our church could be helpful to monitor should the clergy tenure review proceed in Ireland. The motion to commission the review was clearly passed, without the need for a counted vote, but there was a considerable minority who voted against. I suspect, should this return with concrete legislative proposals in a year's time, that the debate could be lively and the result uncertain.

Tom Woolford, Blackburn, 070