

GENERAL SYNOD

HUMAN DIGNITY OF DISABLED CHILDREN

Summary

That this Synod, reaffirming its belief that every person is unique and precious and made in the image of God, and endorsing section 6 of the Equality Act (2010):

- i) Challenges the common assumption that bringing a disabled child into the world is a tragedy to be avoided;*
- ii) Calls upon healthcare providers and other public authorities to improve the support they give to the parents and families of children born with disabilities;*
- iii) Calls upon Her Majesty's Government and healthcare providers to ensure that mothers whose unborn child may be disabled in any way are given comprehensive and unbiased information about the condition and support available to them;*
- iv) Calls upon dioceses, parishes and chaplaincies to consider how they might better witness to the human dignity of disabled children, including the better pastoral advice and support they might offer to their parents and families.*

This motion is aimed at ensuring that parents and mothers in particular have access to the information and practical support that is available to them when the possibility of abortion is being considered especially when the unborn child might be disabled. It also aims to strengthen the church's witness to the human dignity of all God's children.

Background:

1. This motion originated when a church member from Wigan approached her Area Dean and shared her personal experience. She had gathered information and built a network of Christian trained counsellors in the North West, who would be prepared to offer unbiased advice, and help parents considering abortion to understand all of their options. Crucially she and others also committed to walking with them on the journey of raising a child without family support, and to being there to support those who did decide to pursue termination. She began to recognise the scale of the need for such a ministry, and asked the local church leaders to help, and sought to bring the issue to the attention of the Church of England. Indeed she knew about a motion passed by General Synod in 2005 but not acted upon.
2. An informal group from across the Diocese of Liverpool gathered to pray and to explore how her example might help bridge divisions in the Church, as in the rest of society, around abortion. Whether a pregnancy proceeds or is ended, love is needed more than anything. Some of the conversations were painful, but there was a shared recognition that the difficulty we had in talking about these issues demonstrated that the Church was in danger of falling into silence over an issue deemed 'too difficult'. We took the name 'Liverpool Magnificat Group', inspired by Mary's visit to Elizabeth, and their mutual support in their two unexpected pregnancies. The Magnificat Group included people with experiences of disability, baby loss and of good and bad examples of support and advice given to parents and to children.

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3. In October 2019, this motion was brought to Wigan Deanery Synod and debated. There was a concern about the danger of being perceived to be standing in judgement on those who proceeded with an abortion. This is not the intention of this motion, and the wording of the motion and the ministry and histories that have led to this motion are intended to speak of grace and of blessing. When it was debated, members from all parts of the Church spoke of their own experiences of disability, and of the need for good support before, during, and after both abortions and pregnancies carried to term. The motion was passed unanimously both at the Wigan Deanery Synod and, in March 2022, at the Liverpool Diocesan Synod.

Current situation:

4. In 1990, the Abortion Act 1967 was amended to reduce the time limit for when abortions could be performed from 28 weeks to 24 weeks but it was also amended to raise the time limit in the case of children with a disability to the time of birth.
5. The Church of England has debated the subject of abortion on a number of occasions. Barry Barnes (Southwark) brought a Private Members' motion to GS in November 2002 introducing it by saying that when the Abortion Act 1967 was enacted, it had been said that the number of abortions would be relatively small, but there was now one abortion every three minutes in England and Wales. Speakers in the debate spoke of the psychological trauma caused to a woman by having an abortion and the pressures to abort a potentially disabled child, which was now legal even at full term, and how easy it was to have an abortion.

His motion was amended was passed by 222 votes to 22.

That this Synod being gravely concerned with the fact that in England there are currently 500 abortions every day of the year, call upon Her Majesty's Government to bring in urgent legislation to restrict the abuses of the Abortion Act and, in doing so, to give consideration to the following:

(a) protecting women from being coerced into abortions and providing counselling facilities to help women keep their babies;

(b) guaranteeing a woman's right to full disclosure about the balance of risk involved; and

(c) protecting those women most likely to be injured by abortion by requiring the screening of patients.

6. The General Synod's debate about the Church's welcome to people with Down's Syndrome in 2020 gave a focus, as well as acting as a cautionary tale. Sally Phillips' documentary 'A World Without Downs' had highlighted the effect of new screening for Downs Syndrome, in utero. In Scandinavia there were now almost no children being born with Downs, not because they had been 'cured' but because almost every baby tested positive had been aborted. The Synod motion had steered clear of naming this reality, instead encouraging the Church to extend every welcome to people with Downs Syndrome, and to all, as every

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human being is created in the image of God, equal by Creation and in our need for Redemption.

7. Heidi Crowter, a young woman with Down's Syndrome from the North West, took the government to court in July 2021 for perpetuating the disability selective abortions. In the last decade the number of abortions for babies with Down's Syndrome has risen by 42%. Before the announcement of a General Election, amendments had been proposed to the Criminal Justice Bill in May 2024 to reduce the time limit for abortion from 24 weeks to 22 weeks and also to make it illegal for babies with Down's Syndrome to be aborted past the legal limit whether it remains at 24 weeks or reduced to 22 weeks. We will have to wait to see whether this Bill is re-introduced in the next Parliament.
8. According to a press release from Don't Screen Us Out in May 2024, Department of Health and Social Care figures record that in 2022,
 - There were 3,124 abortions for babies with disabilities.
 - The number of late-term abortions at 24 weeks gestation or over where the baby had a disability was 256.
 - There were 760 abortions where there was a baby with Down's syndrome, an increase from 2019 when there was 656.
 - 46 abortions took place where the baby had cleft lip/cleft palate.

It has been estimated that there have been at least 3,000 abortions in England and Wales due to disability every year since 2014. A 2014 Department of Health and Social Care review found evidence that there is significant under-reporting of the number of abortions. These numbers are therefore likely to be significantly higher.

9. Whilst our motion is not proposing a change in the Abortion Act 1967, it is important to acknowledge the context in which these decisions have to be made and the wider implications for church and society. These decisions are very difficult ones for parents and families to make and we should be ensuring that they are able to make the best ones they can.

The Motion

10. It has 4 parts to it:

- i) Being disabled or having a child who is disabled is not a tragedy to be avoided but a reality to be accepted and a place where we may look for God's grace:
 - Genesis 1:27 tells us that we are made in His image
 - Genesis 1:31 that everything God made was very good.
 - Psalm 139:13-16 reminds us that God makes each and everyone of us and we are unique and precious and that even in our mother's womb he was 'knitting' us together.

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- Jeremiah 1:5 reveals that his calling to be a prophet to the nations was made before he was even born.
 - Matthew 10:29-31 Jesus himself says that all of us are of infinite value and none of us are outside his Father's care.
- ii) Support for families with children with disabilities should not be a postcode lottery. A BBC report February 2024 outlines the ways in which families of disabled children often find themselves caught between the statutory obligations of the NHS and local authorities, frequently left to carry too much of the burden of care by themselves. Like the elderly, disabled children are victims of an institutional failure to integrate social and health care: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-68238040> The issue is of course one of funding at a time when local authorities and the NHS are under severe financial constraints but parents and families of children born with disabilities deserve support
- iii) Given the financial crisis, prospective parents and mothers need to be able to have advice so that they can make an informed decision about their pregnancy. Since the Wigan motion was first passed there has been a significant change in the culture around abortion, as the medical consultation required under the 1967 Act has moved to an online consultation, and there is less space to assess whether a mother might be under pressure at home and whether they are being honest about the 9 week limit on such consultations. Pills are now routinely sent to pregnant women to administer to themselves at home, where they are left to deal with the immediate and long-term consequences by themselves.

*In a reply to a General Synod question in 2012, the Mission and Pastoral Affairs council agreed that **women must be given impartial evidence based information including alternatives to abortion but there are problems when such information is given out by providers who are paid for performing abortions. All providers who are remunerated for performing abortions ought to offer women access to health professionals/counsellors who are employed neither by the provider nor by its associated or parent companies. Whilst NHS providers can be held accountable for the services they recommend, it does not adequately address the problem of independent sector providers.***

- iv) If we are calling upon others to make a change then the church at every level needs to show by its actions that it backs up its words. There will be parents and mothers known to and within our congregations who will be faced with this challenge and they need to know that they are not alone and that there is practical help and support for them.

Conclusion:

11. By the time General Synod meets, there will be a newly-elected government who will need to plan their legislative agenda and budget for their first term. We sincerely hope and pray that this motion will strike the right chord and add further

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weight to the church's witness to being pro-life and for desiring life in all its fulness.

Ven Pete Spiers
On behalf of Liverpool Diocesan Synod