

## General Synod Report

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Business at the General Synod today was dominated by finance. Wisely it had been decided to take most of this in conjunction.

The first item this morning was the Budget for National Church Responsibilities (known as Vote 2). Although there were some calls for an increase in spending on the central bodies the view that has prevailed is that at a time when Dioceses are struggling to meet commitments the central bodies should not increase spending. This has meant that overall there have been a number of cuts. The most controversial of these was a post relating to ministry to Deaf people.

The last three items of the day were a presentation on forthcoming financial issues, a report on clergy stipends and pension.

Many Dioceses are already facing grave financial problems and the existing commitments with regards pensions will exacerbate this. Proposals to increase stipends and pensions further were presented within this context. It was pointed out that if every member of the CofE gave 80p per week extra all the costs of the proposals would be met. Reference was also made to how far short giving falls of the 5% target the Church has talked about for the last few decades. Whether either of these are realistic at a time when so many are deeply concerned by the direction of the Church remains to be seen.

The proposals with regards stipends are briefly: -to move away from the present system (a payment to relieve clergy of financial worry) to a focus on reward for work done -to compare stipend levels to the pay of head teachers in primary schools - but at 80%. -therefore a stipend of around £20,000 (nearly £4,000 increase) (housing benefit is calculated at something over £9,000) -to retain current differentials (for Bishops etc) but to remove the current differential for Residentiary Canons

All these proposals and more will now go to Dioceses and Parishes for discussion with reporting back needed by 30 June next year.

At the end of the morning Estelle Morris MP, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, addressed the Synod. The Secretary of State sketched out something of the government policy on education and then spoke specifically about faith-based schools. The proposals to allow more faith-based schools has been widely publicised and has been opposed by many. The Secretary of State explained that whilst 20-30 years ago there was a reluctance to be open about value bases in education this was now widely recognised. No education could take place without such a value base. She asserted that during this time the Church Schools had been confident in their own value base that was part of the reason why they had done so well relatively.

Of course the Government is now encouraging faith-based schools from a range of religious communities. Since September 11th there has been some concern expressed in the media about Muslim schools. The Government's response to this is to recognise that faith-based schools are increasing in number - as private schools. What they are doing is providing an incentive for them to become integrated into the mainstream of education - which of course provides some public accountability and control.

The government wish to be tolerant of faith-based education whilst ensuring that faith-based education teaches tolerant.

The remaining debate of the day was on proposals to develop the permanent Diaconate. I reported on this yesterday and there were no surprises in the debate or decisions taken, all the amendments were lost. This report will now go for consideration within the report. The report may lead to actual change, or it may be quietly forgotten like many other such reports.

During this afternoon some residents of Octavia Hill Estate attempted to mount a protest in the visitors gallery but the Church House security staff soon evicted them without them being noticed by many people.

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