

General Synod Report

Date : 14 November 2002 (Thursday)

Source : EVNEWS Item

On Monday the two Convocations and the House of Laity separately voted to rescind the previous resolutions of the Convocations which stated that marriage is indissoluble except by death and that the marriage service should not be used for remarriages. This morning the whole Synod debated a final approval motion to do the same. Although a very long debate (any member is entitled to speak at final approval) the outcome was never in doubt. This decision tidies up the position of the Church on remarriage. However, it also has a detrimental effect on those clergy, such as myself, who believe that the Church should model in our public ministry and public services what we teach - that marriage is for life. Previously it was possible to say that we will not conduct marriages where one partner is divorced with a former partner still living and that this was the teaching of the Church. Now, it simply comes down to the fact that I, as a minister, have a personal objection to remarriage and I will not remarry them. Nearly a third of the laity and over a quarter of the clergy voted against the change.

The second item of the business was the 'approval' of three appointments to the Archbishops' Council. The Synod can only approve or reject. There was some concern that one of those to be appointed was the Chairman of the Board of Education who is a Diocesan Bishop. Some felt the Council had too many Bishops on it.

First business of the afternoon was a debate on Female Genital Mutilation. This was a fairly gruelling debate in view of the subject matter and some of the information imparted. The final motion was approved without dissent. However there was a difference about the response to cultures that carry out the practice (there are apparently 2 million girls each year who are disfigured in this way including about 2,000 in this country - illegally.) The original motion from Keith Masters had described FGM as 'evil'. Some felt that this was too strong in view of the fact that it was ingrained in many cultures. Therefore the motion was modified slightly with the effect that the word 'evil' was removed. Several speakers noted that FGM is carried out within certain cultures irrespective of religion. Sometimes it is mistakenly reported that it is a Muslim practice.

The rest of the afternoon, almost 4 hours, was spent on Clergy Stipends, Pensions and other financial issues. The report contained a whole range of proposals and it was because of the discussion on a number of these, together with a range of amendments,

that the debate took so long. The Synod voted for most of the recommendations, in particular this will have the effect of increasing clergy stipends above the rate of inflation for the next two years.

A more controversial proposal was to increase the stipend still further. The initial proposal had been to move to a particular benchmark significantly above the current level (about 20% up). The report proposed to delay this but begin to implement it after 2007. This had been widely opposed by the Dioceses. However it was still put into the report and when an attempt to remove it was put by Simon Killwick a vote by houses led to the proposal being retained despite the opposition of Laity and Clergy -the Bishops sank the motion to remove it.

The other area of possible controversy was the treatment of differentials (the extent to which Bishops, Deans etc get paid more). There had been attempts about 5 years to axe these but the Synod had not voted for this. In the report there was a very slight increase in the differential. The Archbishops' Council had opposed this and in the event instead there was a vote for a slight decrease.

A final part of the package was the proposal to remove guaranteed annuities. In the 1970s the assets of individual parishes were stripped and centralised. A guarantee was given to parishes that part of the former trusts would still go to the parishes. This guarantee is now being undone. Guaranteed annuities do seem like an historical anomaly, however, their removal (which will have to be approved by Parliament) represents the final plank of the centralisation of the historic assets of the Church. There was regular reference this afternoon to the financial crisis the Church is facing with many dioceses close to financial collapse. It was pointed out that the effect of centralisation has been detrimental to the Church, in the present climate where so many churches teach error and we can appoint leaders who dishonour the Word of God, it is small wonder that many people are unwilling to give.

It was a long day and fairly dull. Four hours of financial discussion is hard going.

This Group of Sessions finishes tomorrow lunchtime. The morning business consists of a debate on the funding of the Churches Conservation Trust and then the National Youth Strategy. It is widely acknowledged that the Church needs to address the rapid decline in the numbers of young people attending church. As so often there seems to be a lot lacking in the report, but overall the importance being given to youth evangelism is important.

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