

General Synod Report Tuesday at Church House, Westminster

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After opening prayers the Synod began debating a series of legislative items, which were fairly uncontroversial.

Next the Synod debated a report entitled 'Higher Education and the Church's Mission'. The report reiterates the Church's commitment both to the value of higher education and to the role of full-time chaplains. There were a total of eight amendments highlighting a certain dissatisfaction with the way the report was being presented. One of the amendments drew attention to the fact that some chaplains, far from encouraging missions seemed to damage it by their failure to teach what the Bible teaches. A further amendment, which was narrowly rejected, drew attention to the work done by local churches with students in particular. Indeed many evangelical churches are very active in student work and employ far more student ministers than are employed as official chaplains.

Durham Diocesan Synod had called for a debate on election addresses for the forthcoming elections to the General Synod. For some reason they wished candidates to be required to declare which organizations they belong to. After a short debate the Synod voted to move to next business, which happened to be lunch.

The first business of the afternoon is the part two of the Clergy Terms of Service report. This contains draft proposals in respect of clergy who presently have freehold. The intention would be to move such clergy onto a basis of Common Tenure (a concept invented in the first report). The reason for this is, apparently, to allow for an easier means of getting rid of unsuitable clergy. There is clearly quite a lot of opposition to the principles to which the report is working and even more opposition to particular aspects. Several speakers however, in effect, threatened that the Synod would have to keep revisiting this issue until freehold is abolished. Some are concerned that all this represents a shift away from the previous concepts of ministry as a vocation and the focus of ministry as predominantly local to a situation where clergy are part of a big corporation with its human resources departments, capability procedures, managerial reviews etc. Other concerns highlight the lack of trust within the Church where people fear that change will lead to people being hounded out of office, this view was expressed from different angles. However, the greatest fears concern the proposals in relation to benefice property (church, churchyard and parsonage) if freehold is abolished. An amendment was passed expressing the discontent with the proposals to vest these properties in a Diocesan Board of Finance (another centralising tendency) but there did not appear to be a front-runner in the proposals for an alternative, except the retention of freehold.

There are several years of work to be done on these proposals. The report was approved with about one fifth of the clergy and one quarter of the laity against even the amended and general introductory motion.

The penultimate item of business was a report regarding the details of the General Synod elections to take place in the summer. Since all the decisions that affect this had already been made it was largely a matter of the Synod seeing the implications of decisions made. There will be a drop of around 15% in the membership of the Synod.

Questions were the final item of business, which, as usual, were on a wide range of subjects. One interesting question concerned whether the Pensions Board would be required to make pension provision for the same-sex partners of clergy. Though this has not happened yet it appears quite possible that recent government legislation in this area will require the Church to make financial provision for something it believes to be wrong in the sight of God.

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