

General Synod Reflection – York, July 2024

I wonder what would have grabbed your attention from the General Synod agenda for this last group of sessions:

- a theological report on trust
- legislative business on Church Funds Investment and Chancel Repair Liability
- revision of the Standing Orders on the Crown Nominations' Committee
- the budget of the Archbishops' Council
- revision of the new Clergy Conduct Measure
- a proposal to increase weekly rest periods for office holders
- a Diocesan Synod motion on the dignity of disabled children
- legislative business on the National Church Governance Measure
- a private members' motion discussing abuse within the Soul Survivor Network
- a Diocesan Synod motion on Foodbanks
- or another one asking us to pray for the persecuted church
- hearing and responding to the voices of children and young people
- or Living in Love and Faith – again

Those of us who were at the recent Clergy Day will have heard Bishop Michael sharing his frustration that, as a church, we seem to be stuck on LLF, when there are so many other important things we need to be talking about in terms of our mission here to live and tell the saving story of Jesus Christ with, and to, the people of our diocese.

Thinking back on that list of the things other than LLF which we discussed in York, the church is continuing to get on with what we might call our 'core mission'. I came away from these sessions inspired to try to find out if we have a BSL interpreter living locally who might come and support us in our worship, to lobby our new MP to keep up pressure on the new government to end the normalising of foodbanks in our society, to acknowledge the direct link between climate justice and racial justice, and to pray for the release of Layan Nassir, a young Palestinian Christian woman of only 24, who has been detained without charge by the state of Israel since April.

And yet, LLF is not something we can 'get past'. For those who oppose change, this is a first-order matter that cuts to the heart of their Christian identity and makes them question their ability to remain within the Church of England. For those who long for change, this same matter cuts to the heart of their Christian identity and their profound belief that this is about addressing injustice and exclusion. I think both sides understand the other's position. In York we heard how as part of the most recent stage of the LLF process, within working groups, strong bonds of friendship were formed despite huge theological difference. I'm sure most of us recognise that same pattern from our own churches or clergy chapters. We love one another despite our differences.

The amended motion on LLF that was narrowly passed is not the end of the story. We will return to it in February for further votes. Differences are deeply entrenched on General Synod and played out there on a national stage. But the impact of this vote and future votes will be lived out here at a local level.

In the Guardian, spot my echo chamber, there's a column called 'Dining across the divide' where two people who share very different perspectives on a particular issue meet for a meal and talk. In the same way, we are invited as Christ's wounded body to meet at his table and there to dine 'across the divide'. To love one another not despite our differences but, just maybe, because of those differences.

We disagree on so many things already – music, liturgy, robes, our theology of salvation, how we celebrate the Eucharist - and in saying that I am not trivialising the nature of this current disagreement. And yet, I dare to hope that you long for the church I serve to thrive in its ministry – just as I long for all your churches to thrive in their ministries and, through those beautifully diverse ministries, for Christ to be made known and lives to be transformed.

Speaking wholly personally, one of the most depressing aspects of General Synod is the way in which the chamber empties when we come to Evening Prayer, because many 'don't like the style' – it isn't exactly to their taste. And yet, by staying in the chamber for these services, I experienced some beautiful worship – some amazing modern music and a transcendent sung Evensong. LLF as it currently stands isn't exactly to anyone's taste, but let's stay in the room, let's not rush away. Because if we stay, I believe there's still the chance for us to be surprised by God's Holy Spirit, and for Jesus's prayer that we 'may be one' to be made visible in us.

Jo Stobart
10th July 2024