



DIOCESE IN EUROPE GENERAL SYNOD REPORT

Group of sessions held in November 2023



Church House, Westminster

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Introduction

It is unusual for General Synod to meet in November – indeed, this was the first time General Synod has used its November contingency dates since 2020.

The primary reason to meet in November was to recognise the progress and next steps of Living in Love and Faith. Other business included two legislative items: the Safeguarding Redress Measure and the Churches Conservation Trust Order, and the reappointment of the Chair of the Church of England Pensions Board – Clive Mather – to a second and final term, concluding in April 2029.

You can access [full video recordings](#) of all the sessions, along with the [background papers](#).

The next group of sessions will be 23-27 February, again at Church House in London.

Robin Hall, on behalf of the Diocese's Synod members

Presidential Address



It is customary for the Archbishop of Canterbury to give the Presidential Address at meetings in London, and the Archbishop of York to give the Presidential Address when the Synod meets in York. This time, Archbishops Justin and Stephen gave a joint Presidential Address. Archbishop Justin focussed on the pain and anguish caused by the acts of violence in Israel and Gaza, and Archbishop Stephen reflected on the importance of the work before Synod in November, especially the next steps for Living in Love and Faith.

Living in Love and Faith

The story so far: February – July 2023

In February 2023, alongside repenting of both the Church's homophobia and its treatment of LGBTQI+ people, General Synod also passed the House of Bishops' proposals for blessing same-sex couples ("Prayers of Love and Faith") and new Pastoral Guidance, which would replace the 1990s guidance known as *Issues in Human Sexuality*.

The next step was that both the Prayers of Love and Faith and the Pastoral Guidance would be developed by different working groups and put to General Synod for approval in July.

In the event, this was not sufficient time to allow the working groups to produce the drafts by July, so it was decided to use General Synod's contingency dates in November instead.

What happened after July

In October, the House of Bishops released report GS2328, which outlined the progress

made since February and the latest proposals for the **Prayers of Love and Faith**. One key difference from what General Synod had voted for in February was that the Prayers would no longer be approved for use at a standalone service, i.e. a service held especially for a same-sex couple. Instead, the prayers would only be for use at an existing act of public worship, such as the Sunday Eucharist or Evensong. The **Pastoral Guidance** was not ready to be discussed at the November meeting and will come before Synod at a future date.

The November meeting

The motion before General Synod, proposed by the Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, as the lead Bishop for Living in Love and Faith, was:

“That this Synod, conscious that the Church is not of one mind on the issues raised by Living in Love and Faith, that we are in a period of uncertainty, and that many in the Church on all sides feel pain at this time, recognise the progress made by the House of Bishops towards implementing the motion on Living in Love and Faith passed by the Synod in February 2023, as reported in GS2328, and encourage the House to continue its work of implementation.”

There then followed 14 amendments, tabled by a variety of bishops, clergy and laity. The most significant amendment was from the Bishop of Oxford and was intended to restore the use of the Prayers of Love and Faith at standalone services *“on a trial basis, on the timescale envisaged by the motion passed by the Synod in February 2023.”*

This was the only amendment which passed, doing so with a majority of just one vote in the House of Laity.

The debate on the motion and its amendments stretched across two days. It was, at times, particularly heated, with painful and hurtful language used and pastoral ministers were made available to support members of Synod who felt personally impacted by the debate. One of the most memorable moments of the nine-hour debate came from Bishop Sarah as she summed up the debate:

“None of us denies the deeply divisive nature of our disagreement but this is not a creedal issue;

unity, however, is... For some the simple fact that I have led this process has meant they see me no longer as in communion with them, I want to ensure them that I still believe that we are in communion with one another. And whilst I may no longer be invited to eat at their table, they will always be welcome at mine. And if that means I need to sit outside with the powerless, the marginalised and the lost, then that is where I will sit and I am certain that I will also encounter Christ there.”

The amended motion passed by 227 votes to 203, with a majority of seven votes in the House of Clergy and just four votes in the House of Laity (a defeat in any one of the three houses is enough for the motion to fail).



L-R, Robin Hall, the Revd Tuomas Mäkipää, Bishop Robert and Mary Talbot during the final session of the debate.

What happens next?

On 12 December, the House of Bishops commended the use of the Prayers of Love and Faith at regular, scheduled services, starting from 17 December. It is unclear when the Prayers may be used at standalone services, but it is unlikely to be before spring 2024.

The work on the Pastoral Guidance continues and is likely to come before General Synod in July this year. The situation for some clergy in same-sex relationships in Europe was raised in a question to Bishop Sarah (see *Questions*).

Bishop Sarah and Bishop Philip Mountstephen (Truro) have now stood down from their leading roles in Living in Love and Faith. The lead is now shared between Martyn Snow, Bishop of Leicester and Helen-Ann Hartley, Bishop of Newcastle.

Robin Hall.

Safeguarding Redress Measure

Following the investigation by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) within the Church of England in 2020, General Synod made a number of commitments to focus on victims. Amongst these was a decision to create a Redress Scheme to support victims both financially and with other support, where this was needed, as well as acknowledging wrongdoing and helping victims to rebuild their lives.

Since September 2020, an Interim Support Scheme has been providing support until the full Redress Scheme could be put into place. At November's Synod, a Draft Measure for the full Redress Scheme was brought before Synod for its First Reading.

The Measure sets out details of how the Scheme would be established and initially funded by money supplied by the Church Commissioners. Every speaker expressed support for the principle of establishing this Scheme.

Potentially more controversially, however, the Measure also sets out proposals for how, following any redress payments to victims, parishes and other church organisations might be compelled to make a financial contribution to redress payments which had been made where the abuse occurred within the part of the Church that for which they had overall responsibility. A number of Synod members expressed concern about compelling Church Councils to contribute financially, since they might have had little or no knowledge of, or ability to prevent, the abuse. It was pointed out that this might create a great many complications for parish treasurers, especially where parishes had merged since the original events took place, since a liability might be inherited by a new parish for which many members of the congregation would have had no responsibility.

Doubts were also expressed about whether it would be possible to obtain insurance to cover any demand for a financial contribution, although the Scheme requires all PCCs to do this.

None of this has any impact on payments being made promptly and fully to victims, but only how

the Redress Scheme Fund might be topped up again by other Church of England bodies after such payments have been made.

Finally, the detailed regulations which will be required to operate the Redress Scheme have not yet been drafted, so it was not possible to see exactly how the scheme would operate in practice.

A number of other questions were raised by Members about different aspects of the Draft Measure.

In a full vote of Synod, the Measure was approved by a majority to be sent to a Revision Committee, which will consider proposals from Members to amend the text, and it will then be returned to Synod with any proposed amendments, for a Second Reading, probably at our meeting in July 2024.

Clive Billenness.

Churches Conservation Trust Order 2023

The Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) retains church buildings for public use when the buildings are no longer required for the purpose of public worship, but are important from a heritage perspective and it is not appropriate for the buildings to be converted to alternative use, such as housing.

General Synod approved the Church Commissioners proposal of a total grant of £4.8m from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2027, as the Church's contribution to the CCT. This is an increase of 6.6% compared with the previous three year period.

The Church Commissioners' contribution to the CCT is 34%, with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport making up the remaining 66%.

Questions

Questions allow members of Synod to raise any question with the relevant person or authority. These have to be submitted in advance and are published with a written reply. However, at the Synod itself, the person asking the original

question is able to ask a supplementary question.

The following questions were asked by members representing the Diocese in Europe:

Question 78: Addressing the impact of the current Pastoral Guidance on clergy in same-sex relationships in Europe, **Robin Hall** asked the Bishop of London whether the Pastoral Consultative Group – tasked with drafting the new Pastoral Guidance as part of Living in Love and Faith – would consider the needs of clergy in European countries, Portugal for example, where a UK civil partnership has limited or no weight in law, and where clergy in same-sex relationships have to choose between a civil marriage – with the potential of losing their permission to officiate – or having no legal protections for them and their partner.



The Bishop of London replied that she was happy to ask the Pastoral Consultative Group to do so.

Question 140: In a question to the Council for Christian Unity, **Clive Billenness** asked about the continued formal recognition of the separate episcopal church, The Free Church of England, following the behaviour of one of its priests who had described female CofE clergy as “witches” on social media, and the absence of any disciplinary procedure to address such behaviour.



The Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe, Bishop Robert, answered as Vice-Chair of the Council. As a supplementary question, Clive asked Bishop Robert if he would write to the Head (Bishop Primus) of the Free Church, John Fenwick, to express concern about such behaviour. Bishop Robert assured Synod that he had already received a message from John Fenwick assuring him that the priest involved would be spoken to about his conduct.

There have also been other unfortunate comments on social media referring to members of the Church of England using homophobic and generally offensive language. Clive continues to monitor the situation with other Synod colleagues and may bring the matter back to the General Synod in the future.

New clergy representatives

Following the appointment of Smitha Prasadam as Bishop of Huddersfield, and the retirement of Dale Hanson, there are two new clergy representatives from the Diocese in Europe. As both positions became vacant on or before 31 July 2023, it was not necessary to hold by-elections; instead, the votes from the September 2021 election were recounted. This resulted in the election of the **Revd Tuomas Mäkipää**, Chaplain of Helsinki, Finland, and **Fr Richard Seabrook SSC**, Chaplain of Torre Vieja, Spain.

Your representatives on General Synod

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All Synod papers are available online to read, as well as a record of all votes cast where the vote was taken by name and not by a simple show of hands.

You can find these at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/about-general-synod>

Sessions of General Synod are also webcast live on the internet, and can be watched in dedicated playlists on the Church of England's YouTube Channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/TheChurchofEngland/featured>

The next meeting of General Synod is scheduled to take place in February 2024.