

**By Susie Leafe, Director of Reform (UK)**

The July 2017 sessions of the Church of England's General Synod (or parliament) were very significant for the future of the Church. Again and again, both the decisions made, and the manner in which they were made, showed scant regard for Scripture or the traditions of the Church. Instead, members were asked to base their decisions on emotional stories or the impact of secular headlines.

More worryingly, perhaps, was the atmosphere of the chamber; God's word was mocked openly and decisions were made lightly, with arrogant laughter. As one member put it: "God is not mocked. The laughter and lack of respect for those who bravely gave the alternate case was beyond words. Bruised, battered, bullied, betrayed, bewildered."

#### **STEP ONE: Synod REJECTED defining 'the common good' in biblical terms.**

Encouraged by the Archbishop of York, General Synod voted to reject two amendments to a motion about how we should respond to the general election.

The first, sought to encourage our prayers for the 'common good' to be in line with that which is "revealed in the Bible and taught by the Church". The Archbishop's response to this was, "The Word became flesh and sadly we are now making it word, word, word".

The other urged the government to reduce economic inequality, safeguard the sanctity of life, promote marriage and the family and maintain the fundamental freedom of biblical based speech and the manifestation of the Christian faith. The Archbishop of York said that "There were many things there that one would want to disagree with really".

#### **STEP TWO: Synod REJECTED the opportunity to promote the uniqueness of Christ.**

In a debate about how we engage with multi-faith environments, an amendment was put seeking Synod to re-affirm a report on the uniqueness of Christ, that was mentioned in our documentation but ignored in the motion. The Bishop of Huddersfield refused to welcome the amendment as 'friendly' - and talked instead about how we already had a 'well balanced' motion. His lack of enthusiasm may have swung the vote – convincing people that we engage best with people of other faiths when we hide the uniqueness of Christ in a sub paragraph of a report.

The vote was carried, on a show of hands, but there was a request for an electronic vote - which was lost 168-153 - the result was greeted with joy.

#### **STEP THREE: Synod REJECTED an amendment urging bishops, clergy and lay people to take every opportunity to commend Christ.**

In the same debate about our response to the general election, and again led by the Archbishop of York, General Synod rejected an amendment which said:

"Urge all bishops, clergy, and lay people at this time of anxiety and uncertainty to take every opportunity to commend to all the people of England faith in Jesus Christ, who is King of kings, the Prince of peace and the Hope of every nation."

The Archbishop of York's advice about this was: "One can't argue against.... But no, resist the amendment"

#### **STEP FOUR: Synod REJECTED a theological approach to 'conversion therapy' and pastoring the LGBTI community.**

Jayne Ozanne brought a Private Members' Motion describing 'gay conversion therapy' - a poorly defined concept - as harmful. Her speech, and the letters she has sent members of Synod, made clear that any approach to human sexuality that does not affirm the feelings and actions of the LGBTI community, are likely to cause

harm and should therefore be regarded as 'conversion therapy'.

The debate, which included several amendments, was chaired poorly by the Bishop of Manchester. At key points in the debates members were called to share stories of those who had committed suicide, but very few conservatives were called to speak. Angus MacLeay was a great example of setting forth the truth plainly, speaking about the gospel of radical inclusion and radical transformation from 1 Cor 6.

Sean Doherty proposed an amendment that was theological in nature and sought to protect the LGBT community from coercion or manipulation but also affirmed that 'pastoral care, prayer ministry and professional counselling are legitimate means of supporting individuals who chose them freely'.

This amendment was lost in all three houses:

Votes	For	Against
Bishops	10	26
Clergy	64	122
Laity	88	97

After several more amendments - the following motion was passed: Only 1 bishop voted against it, along with 25 clergy and 48 laity.

That this Synod:

(a) endorse the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK of November 2015, signed by The Royal College of Psychiatrists and others, that the practice of gay conversion therapy has no place in the modern world, is unethical, potentially harmful and not supported by evidence; and

(b) call upon the Church to be sensitive to, and to listen to, contemporary expressions of gender identity; and

(c) call on the government to ban the practice of Conversion Therapy.

#### **STEP FIVE: Synod REJECTED a theological approach to the complex issues surrounding gender dysphoria.**

The Diocese of Blackburn brought a motion to Synod asking every parish church to 'welcome and affirm' transgender people and to ask the House of Bishops to consider 'liturgical materials' to 'mark a person's gender transition'.

It passed in all three houses, with only 2 bishops, 28 clergy and 48 laity voting against the motion.

During the debate General Synod rejected an amendment which acknowledged that there were different understandings around gender dysphoria and gender identity and that the preparation of liturgy to mark gender transition raises substantial theological and pastoral issues.

#### **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

In the space of four days, the General Synod of the Church of England have, in effect, rejected the doctrines of creation, the fall, the incarnation, and our need for conversion and sanctification. Instead we have said that we are 'perfect' as we are, or as we see ourselves, and that the Church should affirm us and call on God to validate our choices. No wonder we do not want to proclaim Christ's unique identity and significance for all people.

We have chosen to understand the world through secular reports, unconscious bias training, the teaching of other religions and the results of polls and media headlines, rather than the unchanging word of God.

Paul warns us what happens when we do this in Romans 1:28: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done."

But God does not abandon his people. In his mercy, just a week before this Synod, Andy Lines was consecrated by ACNA, as a missionary bishop to Europe by 11 Primates (leaders of Anglican provinces) and 3 Archbishops. This had been requested by the Gafcon Primates Council, who represent the vast majority of the Anglican Communion. Don't fear - we are not alone - but decisions will need to be made.

