

Speech delivered at General Synod, moving a motion raising concerns about the National Burial Grounds Survey, 7 July 2024

MARK IRELAND, ARCHDEACON OF BLACKBURN, 69

It is with some diffidence that I have tabled this following motion. There is so much good work contained in the Annual Report of the Archbishops' Council that I rejoice in. However there is no mention in the annual report of a major piece of work undertaken last year, namely preparation for the relaunch of the National Burial Grounds Survey.

It is the job of Synod to scrutinise the work of AC and so this motion enables you to scrutinise a major piece of work which has never formally been brought to this Synod, even though it affects every single parish.

I first raised the subject of the National Burial Grounds Survey in Synod two years ago, and in particular the legally binding agreement which had been entered into by Archbishops' Council with a little known company called Atlantic Geomatics, who were working in partnership with an ancestry company called FamilySearch belonging to the Mormon Church, otherwise known as the Latter Day Saints.

The aim of the Survey is to digitise all burial records in the Church of England and all monuments in churchyards to create a searchable database of potentially 250 million personal records. Such a digital record could be very useful to parishes with churchyards and to those researching family history.

However the end does not justify the means. Using money and expertise from the Mormons to undertake this work was wrong. Privatising parochial records and giving a private company the exclusive right to sell on personal data for profit is wrong.

Last year the Archbishops Council renegotiated key aspects of the scheme, which was relaunched this February. Archdeacons welcome some of these changes set out in clause two of my motion and are glad that new officers at CBC are working to improve the scheme.

However there are still very significant aspects of the scheme which need further work.

First, commercial use of the data. Although the Mormon Church is no longer part-funding the project, Atlantic Geomatics International owns the copyright to a hugely valuable database and remains free to sell the data to anyone they choose, including FamilySearch or another agency of the Mormons, a non-Christian body whose interest in ancestry is to enable baptisms on behalf of the dead, a practice totally contrary to Christian doctrine.

Second, data creep. Although called a Burial Grounds Survey, it seeks to film all parish registers without exception, including Baptism registers, confirmation registers and service registers. This is the Google approach to data collection, scraping data far removed from the stated purpose.

Third, safeguarding. Parish clergy know that baptism registers hold information about children that can be highly sensitive, such as home addresses of children at risk from an abusive parent, or children of families fleeing from religious persecution, or children whose high profile parents

face credible security threats. These details should not be filmed and entered into a searchable database owned by a private company, even if shielded from public view, with all the risks of data breaches which afflict almost every institution.

The motion before you has been seconded by four other members of the College of Archdeacons, which is a sign of deep disquiet among archdeacons that we are being asked to promote a scheme which is still fundamentally flawed in several respects and needs further work. Archdeacons are the ones who handle churchyards every day, and we are offering to help create a better scheme.

Clause 4 of our motion seeks to open a dialogue between the Archbishops' Council and the College of Archdeacons, and asks that no more parishes are approached to sign up to this scheme until this work is done.

I very much hope the Archbishops' Council will not resist our offer to work with you to create a much better scheme that benefits the parishes of our country rather than privatising their parochial records for the profit of a private company.

I beg to move the motion standing in my name.

Following a brief debate the following motion was passed, virtually unanimously:

That this Synod

1. *Regret that the Annual Report of the Archbishops' Council does not refer to the relaunch of the National Burial Grounds Survey (NBGS) despite this being a significant piece of work in 2023;*
2. *Welcome changes made to the NBGS since its previous launch, in particular that*
 - a. *Atlantic Geomatics are no longer formally partnering with FamilySearch, an agency of the Mormons (Latter Day Saints)*
 - b. *The financial offer to parishes has improved, saving parishes and estimated £1.5m a year in subscription fees*
 - c. *The management of data under GDPR is much clearer, with the recognition is that the consent of each PCC is required;*
3. *Express its deep concern about other outstanding issues, in particular*
 - a. *Commercial use of the data - giving AG International Ltd copyright ownership of the images collected and the right to sell this database to third parties for profit, which could well include the Mormon Church*
 - b. *Data creep – the NBGS seeks to film all parish registers, not just burial records, including current Baptism registers*
 - c. *Safeguarding – baptism registers hold information about children, including material that is highly sensitive in the case of looked after children, vulnerable children whose address may not be known to a parent who is abusive;*
4. *Request Archbishops' Council to consult with the College of Archdeacons to address these issues, and request that parishes are not asked to sign up until this consultation has taken place.*

Proposer

Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn 069

Seconders:

Bob Cooper, Archdeacon of Sunderland, 105

Nikki Groarke, Archdeacon of Dudley, 236

Alan Jeans, Archdeacon of Sarum, 212

Sally Gaze, Archdeacon for Rural Life, 209