

GENERAL SYNOD REPORT – FEBRUARY 2014

Monday 10th

We met in Church House at a time when the South West was suffering its worst floods and the news was breaking that the Thames was beginning to flood as well. The group of sessions had some really important debates, including the next stage for the legislation for women to be able to become bishops.

For the Bath & Wells contingent, there was another little matter to occupy their focus, viz the residential requirements for the new Diocesan Bishop.

The issue was raised during the Agenda debate where I raised the prospect of a serious review of the way in which the decisions regarding See Houses are made. More specific questions were asked in Question Time where there was a slight chink of light that the Commissioners might shift their position. We also had the news regarding the way in which any objection to the Commissioners' decisions could be made. It is never a happy time when one has to be critical and it was clear that the 3rd Estates Commissioner was not entirely at ease defending the Commissioners corner. It needs to be pointed out that the Bath & Wells members were most concerned about the lack of consultation and the transparency of the Commissioners actions and fully accepted that if proper process had been followed and explanations given that the final outcome may not be different. There was considerable sympathy from other General Synod members for our position.

We had a somewhat tedious presentation from the EIAG which was nonetheless useful in teasing out the issues relating to ethical investments. In particular it explored the appropriateness of engagement with a corporation if we had any concerns regarding the suitability of their practices. It also gave an insight as to the tipping point which might trigger disengagement. It is important that the EIAG are called to make such a presentation regularly regarding the work they do on behalf of the Church and the National Investing Bodies (NIBs).

The really important debate was on Gender Base Violence (GBV). It is sad that in the 21st Century we still have to make a case for defending people against domestic (and other) violence. It is known that 89% of instances of GBV are caused by men. Many of these are "simply" domestic violence but it also includes Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and psychological interference, such as enforced marriages - I.e. it isn't always physical!

We had started the session with worship and helpfully had a second period of worship after the harrowing debate on GBV. One line in the opening worship's psalm was "You still the raging of the seas, the roaring of their waves and the clamour of the peoples" (Psalm 65). This was particularly resonant with "them in Somerset" given the islands and lakes that had been created over the last six weeks or so. The second piece of worship was designed to bring some solace to anyone affected by the debate on GBV. However, even it had a reading from Isaiah which referred to "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isaiah 43) and

another which is earlier in the book and says "I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it" (Isaiah 5)! A theme?

I spent the evening continuing discussions over the Bath & Wells residential issue with my local MP, Tessa Munt. A very different day!

Tuesday 11th

We started the day with a Eucharist which strangely through its hymns and psalms continued some of themes from the previous day's worship in the words that seemed always to reflect the floods and storms. Today's reference had that lovely line "We hear the mighty thunder" and later in the day the hymn talked about "Calm me, Lord, as you calmed the storm"! The text of Archbishop Justin's sermon can be found [here](#).

The day had been given over to the consideration of the legislation for women bishops. As it was unknown whether there would be any issues, although people were hopeful, the notice paper for today was without time constraints. In the end there was little opposition to the Bishops' declaration, the measure and the amending canon. Only two amendments to the measure were tabled - one was withdrawn and the other was lost. The only division that took place was on the amending canon and that was passed with Ayes 304, Noes 33 (90% majority) with 45 Abstentions. At the most pessimistic this still means that nearly 80% voted in favour!

After lunch (which for me involved a discussion of the way in which the Pilling Report might progress) we debated the removal of the constraint of standing orders for the referral to the Dioceses which means that we now can have a conclusion to the consultation by May 22nd.

The rest of the afternoon was spent on various pieces of legislative business.

The construction of the new Diocese of Leeds (aka West Yorkshire & The Dales) from the ashes of the Dioceses of Bradford, Wakefield and Ripon & Leeds had prompted a consideration that legislation was needed so that a Diocesan name could be derived from a geographical area rather than just a town or city in the region. This was accepted.

When the Church Commissioners had been criticised in the '90s over property investment returns there was a need to reorganise and as a result the Pensions Board became the responsible authority for managing the fund set up to deal with Pensions Future Service. After the first triennial valuation, when a significant deficit arose, it was further decided that some of the Church Commissioners funds would be needed to give stability to the funding. This required a Measure (equivalent to an Act of Parliament) to enable their money to be spent in this way. We debated whether we were comfortable in renewing this by means of an Amendment Measure. We were!

As of 2015 the Parochial Fees for the Church of England will be determined by an order which lasts for 5 years. This order allows for RPI uplift in the intervening years

and permits a review should things drift in an inappropriate way. This has freed the Synod from the drudgery of debating a revised order every year as well as reducing staff time in the preparation of the order. I am proud to have been involved in the architecture of this change.

Another area where long established structures needed to be reformed relates to the retainers for Legal Officers. Their fees had been determined in such a way that the value of their retainer as a percentage of actual work performed had dropped from 71% to around 57% over an 11 year period. This was addressed by the creation of a new formula and results in an increase for 2014 of around 30%. Although this is a high percentage increase, most can concede that this will only partially address the real terms reduction over the longer term.

The debate on the revision to Church Representation Rules (CRR) was not particularly well managed. It was well intentioned and handled with good humour by the proposer. It had been prompted by the necessity to simplify the way in which we do things as a church and was aimed at diminishing the burden on smaller parishes regarding some aspects of practice for Parochial Church Councils (PCCs). There are a number of minima imposed on PCCs at the moment which are very difficult for some smaller parish to meet. For example, in the debate one person mentioned that in one parish (85 people) the difficulty of getting a PCC (11 people) to have a standing committee of more than 3 people was very great. Much of the opposition to the changes seemed to come from people with larger parishes who feared that there would be dire consequences (from reducing the minima) from places that had a cabal which would ride roughshod over the parish. Some tweaks to the proposals were made and the debate which spilled over to Wednesday ended up being adjourned to allow the lawyers to ensure that all the tweaks made a coherent whole.

Given that the excellent address from Archbishop Justin on Wednesday morning (before we took the final parts of the CRR debate) spoke about fear hampering our progress in all sorts of ways and that we probably needed to live with incoherence this debate highlighted how quickly we can revert to type. His address can be accessed [here](#).

My evening was spent at a fringe meeting of the Open Synod Group listening to the inspirational John Spence who is our new Chairman of the Board of Finance.

Wednesday 12th

We had a number of very important debates on Wednesday. Our organisation has not been immune to the scandals that have emerged relating to child abuse and the volume of incidents appears to have increased since the Jimmy Savile affair due to increased openness of victims coming forward. Our debate was the result of much work following revelations in Chichester Diocese but was designed to provide a national framework for defences to make the church less susceptible to abuse opportunities going forward. This was an initial debate which took the great work done by the Bishop of Durham and his team and enabled Synod to tease out some of the improvements needed to practices relating to clergy and laity.

This was followed by the completion of the CRR debate from the previous day.

We were treated to a very good debate about the impact of Environmental Issues which was passed with one amendment, which sharpened up the motion by calling for a reorganisation of the Shrinking the Footprint organisation but in such a way as it would be accountable to the Archbishops' Council. The motion also called for appropriate ethical investment decisions to be made to further the church's response by reference to a review from the EIAG (Ethical Investment Advisory Group).

Our oddity for the week was a call to the organisation Girlguiding UK to rethink its changes to its promise. The initial motion was subtly changed by a more reflective amendment but still suggested that there should be greater flexibility for the organisation towards groups (particularly those that had a significant Christian connection) to be allowed to use the old promise.

The motion that would have challenged the Canon relating to robing during divine service was adjourned without debate. The main reason was the need to give more time but the fact that the Safeguarding debate had raised the idea that priests (and others who robe) should not be allowed to do so if they were pending investigation added to the need for a delay in the debate.

Our final session was a presentation on the Pilling Report on Human Sexuality followed by a Q&A.

We had an opportunity to bid farewell to the Bishop of Wakefield who retires shortly when the new Diocese of West Yorkshire & The Dales is formed (at Easter).

This was a strange Synod in many ways. We had done momentous things and had some bizarre debates. There was a sense that the major issue for discussion had moved on and that the next one was taking centre stage. There was a slight sense of nervousness that there might still be spectres preventing smooth passage of the women bishops' legislation. There were certainly no overt celebrations or triumphalism.

Tim Hind

Bath & Wells