

General Synod, Westminster, February 2016

Monday 15th

As my village was staging its new Pantomime this week I was unable to attend the dress rehearsals and I was hoping that the next few days would give me a suitable practice run for the performances later in the week. So I begin a new phase of my Synod life as I return to the backbench. I have been greatly privileged to have served as Vice Chair of the House of Laity for 5 years and consequentially as a member of the Archbishops' Council under Archbishops Rowan, Sentamu and, more recently, Justin.

Our first day together in this group of sessions followed the relatively familiar pattern including Introductions, Debate on the Agenda and Questions. The remarkable items were threefold.

First, we had an extended presidential address from Archbishop Justin debunking many of the myths perpetuated by press following the Primates meeting. Indeed he said the meeting of the world's Anglican leaders "occasioned much miscomment and even more misrepresentation." As an example he noted that some elements of the media misrepresented the decision reached by calling it sanctions or a punishment. The whole text is available here <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5669/archbishop-reflects-on-primates-meeting-in-synod-address>.

Secondly, we were given the first opportunity to look at a number of small pieces of legislation that have been grouped together under the banner of Simplification and entitled Draft Mission and Pastoral Etc. (Amendment) Measure. This untidy pile of items aims to simplify the way in which we, as a church, operate. The most controversial item was the introduction of a much reduced compensation scheme for clergy who leave office following reorganisation. The current scheme is too expensive to invoke. The new scheme being based on external good practice is fair but obviously as it is more affordable has the potential to be used and so creates concern.

Thirdly, we were introduced to the mechanics that will be used for our shared conversation on human sexuality in July. There will be six separate sessions over a day and a half. Some are concerned that this process is taking too long and others that we are spending too much time on this issue over and above "more pressing" matters. There is no pleasing everyone.

Tuesday 16th

Our morning was spent entirely on Evangelism. We started with worship in groups of about 25 followed by very useful discussions about our personal journey to faith in groups of about 5 people. These were, in the group I was involved in, very vibrant discussions and when we regrouped in plenary it served to demonstrate that there was a lot of commonality in the gathered comments.

This was followed by a good presentation on the Archbishops' Task Group on Evangelism and a debate on its Report. The passion for evangelism that came through every speech was palpable.

The contentious debate involved the proposed Columba Declaration regarding to relation with the Church of Scotland embodied in the report (https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2442393/gs_2016_-_report_of_the_coecos_joint_study_group.pdf) from the Joint Study Group of the two churches. It was a poorly drafted, badly announced report and prompted an apology from the Archbishop of Canterbury for the way it was done. In the end the report and declaration were approved but synod was not entirely happy with the way it was done and with the way in which the Scottish Episcopal Church had been engaged.

In the last quinquennium we implemented changes to the Parochial Fees system which have had far reaching impact on the church. Based on proposals that had been grafted while I was a member of DRACS (the precursor to RACS) - so it must have been during the 2005-2010 period - and for which I was co-architect, the fees structure is now based on real statistics relating to the cost of provision and include the cost of the basics. The debates before us invited us to change the items included in the basics by adding the cost of vergers and heating. These were both resisted successfully which means that local practice for these items will result in a variable amount being added to fees depending local factors.

We expected that the final debate would be the hot potato of the proposal for an Enabling Measure to help simplify the legislative process for our church. This had a bit of a rough ride because synod is naturally over cautious. On the one side, proponents argued that they had spent too much of their lives preparing and implementing legislation and, on the other, opponents argued about loss of control.

The proposal was accepted given that safeguards could be introduced satisfactorily once the legislation was drafted for consideration.

Because we had all been very good boys and girls we finished this debate early and as a result were rewarded with an additional debate on Blood Donorship. It encouraged all parishes to further encourage their members to become blood donors and to register as organ donors. Importantly members were reminded to ensure that their families were aware of their decision.

Wednesday 17th

We started with Holy Communion and a very moving sermon from Archbishop Justin. It was the 39th anniversary

of the martyrdom of Archbishop Janani Luwum who was, it is widely believed, murdered by President Amin.

During his address, Justin referred to Luwum as a Red Martyr – one whose blood had been shed in the cause. He contrasted that with those who were White Martyrs – those who sacrifice everything for the gospel – and exist all over the world daily and selflessly ensuring the gospel of Jesus is kept alive.

Our theme for most of the day was Renewal & Reform. The switch from Reform & Renewal had been started almost as soon as the first papers were written 2 years ago but it has taken the church all that time to rearrange it.

The reason is obvious – it is important to reform but renewal needs to precede it. Without renewal we might as well go home!

Before the excitement started, however, we were engaged in a debate on the Impact of Sanctions on Benefit Claimants. This was a debate that had come from a Diocesan Synod motion and like many of that type of motion required a friendly motion to bring it up to date. Further amendments helped to sharpen it up. Harrowing accounts were presented of how insensitive some officials had been in applying sanctions. For example, one claimant had been sanctioned for failing to turn up to an appointment when they had had an hospital appointment.

There was a small amount of twitter humour that arose at this point. There had been, quite rightly, a rebuke from the Archbishop of Canterbury of the press for using the word sanction in relation to the outcome from the Primates Meeting. He had said that the statement had said there were no “sanctions” but, rather, “consequences” for TEC following their actions. Some twitterati were quick to suggest that the benefit claimants were not sanctioned but suffered consequences.

The rest of the day consisted of two presentations and a major debate. The first presentation was a wide ranging look at the Renewal & Reform Activities in the round. The final presentation looked specifically at the progress being made on the Resourcing the Future (RtF) package which will provide additional funds from next year to enable the distribution of central church funds to be targeted better on growth and for the support of needier dioceses.

The debate that formed the filling to the Presentation Sandwich was about the Resourcing Ministerial Education (RME). The contentious elements for some were those relating to the mechanism for funding ordinands which meant that the (age related) grants given steered folk into pathways which may not always be appropriate. A proposal to delay the process by an unspecified period by requesting extensive further consultation with dioceses and training institutes was lost but the small margin (154 For 202 Against) demonstrated the level of concern within synod.

Throughout the synod there are fringe meetings for various groups and the common thread for some of them was the issue of Human Sexuality and how to achieve what is called “Good Disagreement”. Many people on both sides of the coming debate are trying very hard to ensure that the tone of the conversations will be moderate. It isn't fully successful yet but hopefully there will be a sense of listening and understanding in July. The last thing we need is to have a proof texting slanging match.

And so the Pantomime ended. There were some dames, leading ladies and principal boys but no discernible baddies. One feature of synod life that always seems a little comic is where a member of synod request closure of a debate under standing orders. Chester diocese appears to have dominated this activity in recent years with John Freeman being the gold medal winner. However, there was a slight challenge from Hereford that crept in towards the end of the group of sessions. Watch this space.

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