

General Synod, Westminster, 13th - 16th February

Monday 13th

This was never going to be one of those "why do we bother turning up" Synods. The tension in the air when we arrived at Church House was tangible and had been building in social media for weeks before. The "Great Matter" which had been the subject of our shared conversations over a number of years had been exercising the minds of all Synod members and particularly the House of Bishops. This latter group, guided by an inner circle of the College of Bishops, had produced a document which they said was a representation of where their current thinking had reached. To summarise, this document said that they would:

- a) Not seek to change the Doctrine of Marriage
- b) Work to produce a new Teaching Document on this doctrine
- c) Provide advice for clergy on how to deal with same-sex couples
- d) Change the way in which questions were asked of ordinands regarding their sexuality
- e) Attempt to bring about a change of tone and culture so as to improve the welcome that they wished the church to give to members of the LGBTI community

It is a harsh reality that, although there was a lot of anguish apparent in their deliberations and within the report, the Synod was likely to be focussing on the next steps proposed and the impact on the constituencies from which they, the members, come.

With that as a background, the Business Committee Debate and Questions were dominated by this subject. People were asking about the timing of the debate generally - "was it too close to the July Synod?", "should the proposed Group Work Sessions be scrapped to allow for a longer debate?", "was it right to have the Group Work immediately prior to the "take note" debate?". There were also questions regarding the make up of the Bishops' Reflection Group on Sexuality - predominantly male heterosexuals!

The only way for the agenda in this regard to be altered satisfactorily was to invite the Presidents (++Justin & ++Sentamu) to make a judgment. This they did following consultation with the Business Committee and the Group of Six (Presidents, Prolocutors, Chair & Vice Chair of the House of Laity).

As a result the debate planned for the Wednesday was lengthened and there was a gap created between the Group Work and the debate to ensure a time for relaxation if not necessarily a time for considerable reflection.

On the Monday afternoon we spent some time on internal matters relating to the dates of Synod. Here we agreed that we should consider including a Saturday session for the February Synod.

We had a debate on the Reformation and how we might mark the 500th Anniversary of its starting. As it still hasn't finished in many peoples eyes there will surely be more to come.

In his Presidential Address the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke of the uncertainty of times such as these (Brexit etc) and the need for us to be "people of the cross" to ensure that we seize "the best future that lies before us".

Tuesday 14th

This was almost entirely taken up with various bits of Synod "nuts and bolts" legislation. Before the start of the main items we had a farewell address to Sir Andreas Whittham Smith who has been First Church Estates Commissioner since 2002. This was followed by a

debate on replacing the current Church Preliminaries to Marriage with an alternative system because of the complexity of the operation of the current system. This was defeated.

During the rest of the day we achieved an enormous amount of legislative work. Much of the work was either:

- a) consolidation work - rewriting legislation to bring coherence to it but without changing it
- b) pre-consolidation work - doing minor repairs prior to consolidation
- c) changing some legislation, and
- d) simplifying language whilst making consequential changes to the legislation

The biggest change was the introduction a Measure which will enable us to reduce the burden of our current legislative procedure. The success of the legislative procedure going forward would rely on Synod being comfortable with the Scrutiny provisions.

We had some debate last July on an Amending Canon to do two things. The first of these related to vestures and the second to related to liturgy to be used at the burial of a suicide victim. These had been separated into two separate Amending Canons to ensure that any contention over one of the changes didn't prevent the other from being successful. The reason for this is that, when an amending canon is presented as an initial idea, it only requires a 50% majority. When going through its final stages it requires a 2/3rds majority.

The fact that all of this legislative work was successful this time is partly down to this sort of careful pre-planning and partly down to the fact, in my mind anyway, that we had the "Great Matter" to attend to. Synod, when faced with matters of enormity has, in the past, adopted one of two ploys. It, either, throws out all of its toys from the pram and makes it impossible to pass anything, or, it acts in a seemingly subdued manner and clears the pathway for what is to come. You may guess what I suspect happened this time around.

Wednesday 15th

Today was going to be a difficult day after we had cleared the decks of the legislative business, agreed to create a suffragan see for Leicester Diocese, made an appointment to the Archbishops' Council and sent a strong message to HMG to reduce the cap on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals to £2.

We were so keen to free up time for the "Great Matter" that we progressed so quickly in the morning that we were able to have the presentation on the House of Bishops' Report (GS2055 Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations) 30 minutes earlier than had been announced on the day before. This meant that the Group Work could start earlier and the gap between the Group Work and the Debate could be longer.

Some members of Synod didn't feel that the Group Work would be of any value. Others were expressing distrust of the process because, as the House of Bishops were facilitating the groups, they didn't feel that that would render the Groups a "safe space" within which to be open. As a result some 50 members held a protest session offsite. Brilliantly, ++Justin visited them and spoke with them.

After the groups had met and discussed various matters - either using case studies or the report itself to inform their discussion - the Debate started late on Wednesday.

Perception is a weird and wonderful thing. During the debate there was a number of people, outside the chamber, who were monitoring the proportion of those speaking from a particular perspective - and getting upset because it was predominantly opposed to the report. The Chair was, I believe, scrupulous in ensuring that a balance of those who had put into speak

was maintained. One thing that was noticeable was the way in which the Bishops who spoke were keen to apologise for the tenor of the report and expressed again the view that this Report wasn't the culmination of a thought process but just a snapshot of where they were.

The debate was a "Take Note" debate which means that, if passed, the process outlined in the report is taken forward while taking into account the messages received during the debate. The "direction of travel" in the report was to not change the Doctrine of Marriage while allowing the church to tinker with the way it allows the Lesbian & Gay Community to be pastorally accommodated. Many felt that the Doctrine of Marriage should be upheld. However some of these were unhappy with the idea that anything else could change satisfactorily until the Doctrine was explored. How does one make suitable Pastoral Accommodation when the underlying principles haven't been fully examined?

Others felt very strongly that we should have a bigger review before moving too far forward. In a report like mine I cannot give a true account of the complexity of differing opinions and reading the transcript, when it is available, is recommended. A video of the debate is available [here](#).

In not taking note of the debate, Synod is aware that the current Report cannot be brought before Synod again during this quinquennium. However, it doesn't stop other reports being submitted in due course.

The debate was always going to be close in one or other of the Houses of Clergy or Laity. It was expected that the House of Bishops would vote in favour 100%. It was a surprise that the Bishop of Coventry voted against - but he admitted he had hit the wrong button (Note to self not to travel in a lift with him as it might take a while to get to the right floor!).

A vote by houses meant that the report fell in the House of Clergy by 7 votes (93 Ayes : 100 Noes) although it passed in the House of Laity (106 Ayes : 83 Noes). [Combined votes were Ayes 242 : Noes 184 : Abstentions 6]

One consequence of voting the motion down was that two following motions which would have to have been taken on the Thursday would not now be put. These motions invited Synod to either :

- a) bring forward proposals which would affirm the contribution of the LGBTI Christians and reflect the diversity of scriptural interpretation, or
- b) endorse the current stance relating to not changing the Doctrine of Marriage and to not authorise liturgies for the blessing of same-sex unions

Given the different directions the passing of one or other of these motions would have sent our Church, it is with hindsight a mercy that we didn't get to them.

Our Archbishops have since responded very sensitively with a pastoral letter which talks about the way forward from here. It can be accessed [here](#).

Thursday 16th

The morning after was very different. Some folk had sadly departed overnight and so there were fewer present to see a very entertaining tribute from ++Justin to Richard Chartres (outgoing Bishop of London). The highlights were numerous but the outstanding moment has to be a short video of his taste in Shirts.

We were presented with an address ([full text](#)) from the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion, ++Josiah Idowu-Fearon. In it he stated his understanding of our special place

within the Communion and that he believes that "the Church of England has a prescriptive vocation". He continued by saying that we must "take (our) gifts, and make them the centre of (our) local energies: evangelism, pastoral care, growing congregations, theological education, ecumenical passion and acuity, resources, and diocesan labour" but then share them around the Communion.

The most exciting part of the four days was the report on Lay Leadership - Setting God's People Free. This report was for many the antithesis of the report from the previous day. It was affirming of the role of Lay people whilst acknowledging the need to change tone and culture in relation to the interrelationship between lay and ordained. It was a breath of fresh air.

Because we had little contention and fewer people present we found ourselves able to take a Private Member's Motion on Mission & Administration which sought to reduce costs by allowing some administrative functions to be centralised. With a little amendment it went forward successfully.

Conclusion

This was a bruising Synod for all concerned. However, on the positive side the debate on the "Great Matter" was conducted with immense Grace. There was a genuine sense that the House of Bishops were beginning to listen. Sadly some members of Synod acted inappropriately both before and after the debate by saying things which appeared insensitive. It is understandable that when passions are high that people say or do things that they wish they hadn't. Hopefully, there will be healing of personal rifts over time.

For many the result was a relief and for many others it will be a great challenge to their long held positions. It is now vital that all people continue to pray for each other and the Church as a whole.

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