

General Synod, York, July 2014

Friday 11th

The members gathered for what could prove to be a truly historic Synod in York. The trouble with the fact that there is a great matter to be resolved is that so much effort is put in to that matter that the energy levels for everything else is reduced.

We had our usual introductions of new members and the debate on the agenda and in the late evening we had the opportunity to quiz chairs of Boards & Councils in question time. This time Bath & Wells didn't grab the major focus of the first 8 questions!

However, the principal debates related to Women Bishops and Safeguarding.

The whole weekend was structured to enable the legislation for Women in the Episcopate to be decided. As a result there were a couple of debates on this first night to receive the results from the consultation with the Dioceses and to push the legislation through to the next stage. As a result the legislation was referred to the House of Bishops without further ado, subject to a few drafting amendments relating to paragraphing.

On the matter of safeguarding there was a significant fringe meeting where the two archbishops had arranged for members of synod to meet with survivors of abuse (MACSAS). Their stories were intensely harrowing and their criticism of the church's lack of action was robust. Archbishop Sentamu gave an abject apology but clearly the issue of compensation still needs to be resolved. The debate on safeguarding went through without a problem and will have a major impact on clergy and PCC member conduct regulations. The statistic that 1 in 4 (or 1 in 6 depending on gender) of adults have suffered abuse (either as children or adults) is a truly shocking statistic.

Saturday 12th

On Saturday morning we had a presidential address from the Archbishop of York. In this he spoke about choosing life over death by reference to Deuteronomy 30.

The subsequent debate on Standing Orders failed to live up to the spiritual significance of the Presidential Address. These were designed to improve the way in which we appoint specific members of staff. The problem was that when certain posts are appointed the appointment requires approval by synod. On occasions there is a large time lag and this can cause difficulties in the appointment. What was offered by the proposal was that when an appointment was made that it would be deemed to have been approved unless sufficient members wanted to debate it. Despite a challenge this went through satisfactorily.

We were subsequently entertained by some legislative business relating to the provision by the Church Commissioners for pension provision and some Church representation matters, including the reinvention of the University Constituency. The next debate concerned the representation between York and Canterbury in the end it was decided to maintain a slight "bias towards the north" to ensure that the "voice of the North" was heard. Further legislative business followed regarding the Draft Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical (Amendment) Measure.

At lunchtime Philip Giddings and I had to decide formally whether the House of Laity needed to debate the Women Bishops legislative package on Sunday afternoon. We decided not to claim a reference (technical jargon) and fortunately the two Convocations didn't either.

In the afternoon we had an address on The (un)Common Good from Jim Wallis, Christian writer and political activist. I confess to not finding his address as inspirational as I had expected. This was followed by Q&A session and some group work. The content of the group work wasn't as stimulating as it has been in previous years. We reconvened to debate the church's response to the Common Good. This was a great opportunity to talk about the way in which our church interacts with parishioners and the wider community. For me this includes the work done by Near Neighbours, of which I am privileged to be a Director on behalf of the Archbishops' Council. The motion called on all to engage in practical activities locally and to challenge political parties to engage with the church's activities in the way they phrase their manifesto commitments for next year's general election.

Sunday 13th

Synod members and officers attended the service in York Minster and were treated to a much more uplifting address from Jim Wallis. However, as always, the highlight is the choir's rendition of Psalm 150.

"Payments to the Churches Conservation Trust Order 2014" was the subject for our first debate of the day. After a presentation of the Archbishops' Council's Annual Report we had a very productive Q&A session.

We had an impassioned plea a few years ago for some baptismal texts that were in language that is more accessible to those for whom the occasional offices are provided. What has been produced has been the topic of many column inches in the papers as words like 'baptism', 'the devil' and 'sin' have come under scrutiny. This debate came to synod and brought out the purists who wished to retain the status quo and many who minister in areas where 'church speak' isn't parishioners' first language. The tension between these opposing positions was explored and will help to inform any revision of the texts.

The rest of the day was spent looking at finance in the main. We had another presentation - this time on the Churches Mutual Credit Union. This was followed by the approval of the Archbishops' Council's 2015 budget and (yet another) presentation on the activities of the Church Commissioners.

Monday 14th

My day started with a wonderful prayer breakfast courtesy of Christian Aid. Our first business was to affirm the place of the Armed Forces Covenant in the life of the church. This was the sort of debate in which many speakers gave family anecdotes about the vital need for support for service personnel.

Then we came to the 'great matter' as it has become known. There were to be 5 votes altogether. The first was on the Measure, the second on the Canon, the third on the Petition to Her Majesty and the other two relating to the Act of Synod rescinding the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993. Each was to be debated in turn and, with the exception of the first two, only required a simple majority. The first two debates would need a two thirds majority in each of the three Houses (Bishops, Clergy & Laity). The Archbishop of York laid down strict guidelines regarding the conduct of the debate and said he would want people not to rehearse old arguments and would tell people to stop if he spotted any repetition. Everyone was very well behaved and almost without exception the tone of the speeches in the run up to lunch was positive and measured. There were several speeches where people apologised for past behaviour or thanked certain people for their part in the development of this package. After lunch the mood changed slightly and there was a number of tense offerings. The most inspirational speech of all came from Canon John Spence who talked about overcoming difficulties by telling his story of his blindness and how through trust

and taking leaps of faith we can restore Christ to his rightful place and have that trust repaid in buckets. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CslE0xB5Qfo>)

The first debate took most of the time because the others were consequential in the main. When the vote was taken the results were as follows:

	Ayes	Noes	Abstentions
Bishops	37	2	1
Clergy	162	25	4
Laity	152	45	5

and so was passed in all three houses by more than 2/3rds majority.

The debate on the Canon was short and the voting patterns were very similar with the House of Laity 'Noes' down to 40. The other 3 votes were done on a show of hands and went through comfortably.

Understandably some visitors in the public gallery were unable to deny themselves a whoop of pleasure but mostly the synod members contained their reactions until outside the chamber.

Many members wanted to celebrate and there was a fairly empty hall for the start of the important debate on the Magna Carta celebrations for next year. It was suggested that we take an active stance by engaging in the general election next year by encouraging hustings to be organised in our churches. If our Olympic legacy takes 800 years to get going ...

While the party carried on outside the favoured few fought bravely to attend two further presentations; one on the CHARM scheme which provides housing for retired clergy and the other on the Audit Committee report.

Over supper, I attended the Legislative Committee which had to approve the Comments & Explanations Document regarding the Women Bishops Measure that the church sends to the Parliamentary Ecclesiastical Committee. We also had to decide who would represent us at the meeting which will be held shortly. If (and what a surprise it would be, given previous political murmurings, if they did not) the Ecclesiastical Committee deems the legislation expedient it is likely that it will be laid before the two houses in late summer or early autumn.

The crowd that gathered around the TV in the bar at Vanbrugh that evening were cheering enthusiastically as Archbishop Justin dealt with the random questioning from the presenter on Newsnight. (The previous evening they had been cheering the German team in what Archbishop Sentamu had dubbed the "Benedict v Francis" match).

Tuesday 15th

You would think that synod would struggle to complete its final day after such an historic vote on the previous day. It did. Fortunately, the first item was the next stage in the legislative process re Church Representation rules with some very inventive work having been done in the background since the votes on Saturday. The way in which property transaction regulations might be relaxed for PCCs was expertly steered through synod. Finally, there was a genuine attempt to lighten the burden on smaller church communities regarding PCC meetings and membership of steering committees (e.g. every PCC must have a Steering Committee and it must have 5 members of which the Minister and Churchwardens are compulsory members – tough if you only have 4 people in your congregation). It failed to achieve a sufficient majority in all three houses and so it is back to the drawing board on that one!

What more can be said. Well only that the 5 principles that undergird the new legislation need to be printed out on a sheet of paper and handed to every member of the congregations of our churches to remind them that this is their commitment on how to treat one another.

Tim Hind

Bath & Wells