

General Synod, York, 8th - 13th July

Friday 8th

This weekend was always likely to be one where people were going to be tetchy. We never seem to manage this type of event well at the emotional level. As a result some exchanges during the first two days were perhaps a little more robust than they needed to be.

I started by weaving my way through the gathered wild fowl on the York University campus to attend a meeting of the House of Laity where we were given the opportunity to understand better the way the Appointments & Business Committees work. We were also introduced to members of the Standing Committee. This was followed by a good presentation on the work being done to further the development of lay leadership. We finished with a concern being raised about the way some people appeared to be discouraged from staying on for the shared conversations if they were unable to attend all 3 days of conversations. This was explained later (Sunday p.m.) but rumours at a time when people feel vulnerable get a currency that isn't easy to dispel.

Synod convened during the afternoon and we were given an early opportunity to discuss the aftermath of Brexit due to the graciousness of the presidents agreeing to hold an emergency debate.

We always have an ecumenical guest providing an address - this time from the Landesbischof Ralf Meister of the EKD (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland) - and he teed us up with a perspective on Brexit. He mentioned his annoyance that the German response to Brexit had been all about the economic out turn rather than the human relationship costs. He also referred to the way in which we were all looking forward to "celebrating" the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

In the EU Referendum debate there was much concern shown about the way in which the vote had seemingly unleashed a legitimising of hate crime and also about the legacy for our young people who had within their constituency voted very differently from older voters. The call to unite in the common task to build a "generous and forward looking" country was enhanced by an amendment which called on dioceses to promote the idea of champions to assess the work to be done to build stronger communities. There was a recognition that the result was what it was ("we are where we are"), however fragile, and that our gift to the nation could be that positive activity that builds bridges across divided communities.

We had a packed agenda without the emergency motion and this kept the Business Committee on its toes in trying to juggle other bits of the agenda to ensure everything happened. We had two informative presentations. The first was on the Archbishop of York's Pilgrimage and the second was on the Anglican Consultative Council in Lusaka.

The majority of the rest of the day was taken up with the usual "nuts & bolts" stuff relating to Archbishops' Council appointments, the agenda debate, the church commissioners report and questions.

Unusually, Question Time was peppered with some particularly angry exchanges - particularly around the issues of costs for the Bishop Bell case and the shared conversations. Some members of synod held Bishop Bell in high esteem and were venting their anger over the way the case had been conducted. Many of those who are seemingly not wanting the church to move away from traditional teaching on marriage see the shared conversations as the thin end of a wedge and were commenting on the fact that we were spending money on them when so much else needs to be done. Some members were shocked by the violence of the questions and I heard at least one member refer to the toxicity of some comments. Strong stuff.

The one casualty from the Friday schedule was the Report from DAG (Development & Appointments Group) on the progress on the implementation of elements of the "Green Report". This emerged on Saturday and so wasn't lost completely.

One amusing - with hindsight - incident was that the voting cards had been outsourced and had not been fully checked prior to issue. As a result people with the same surname were randomly assigned a Christian name. As a result I was temporarily labelled as a female member of the House of Clergy for the Province of York. Changing Province, Diocese, Ordination Status and Gender was quite a shock - as it must have been for Revd Canon Ruth Hind.

Saturday 9th

The day was taken up predominantly with Legislative and Financial stuff.

The Draft Mission and Pastoral etc. (Amendment) Measure and the Draft Legislative Reform Measure had relatively easy passage through to next stage. There were concerns over Team Ministry issues in the first and over checks and balances in the second. This latter can be pursued later in the Revision Committee.

The Draft Inspection of Churches Measure proved to be slightly more contentious and we were invited to kick it into the long grass.

Then the fun started.

Draft Amending Canons are the way that we amend a selection of Canons based on requests from Synod over a number of sessions. To this end we had two very disparate matters to attend to which had been aggregated under Draft Amending Canon No. 36.

Two Canons needed amending. Canon B8 needed amendment to allow clergy to dress more casually if circumstances dictated so for good reason - for mission or pastoral reasons.

Canon B38 was to be tweaked to allow certain funeral services to be used in the event of a suicide.

The sensitivity for some over the robing issue related to the legislation about disallowing clergy to robe if they were suspended from duties pending a safeguarding enquirer. Some were concerned that two very different issues were being considered and that one might be more controversial than the other. These issues were noted and the Amending Canon was sent for revision.

We had a lively afternoon consisting of a Vision & Narrative for Renewal & Reform where we considered the whole rationale for the massive programme that is now under way. This was followed by a report on the Church of England's Vision for Education. All the papers for these items are available on the [General Synod's website](#).

We finally had our report on DAG (postponed from Friday). This was informative but attracted a lot less criticism than the Green Report had generated last year.

With energies renewed after supper we dealt with the exciting matter of the Archbishops' Council Report for 2015 and the budget and apportionments for 2017.

Synod was prorogued on Saturday evening leaving the next three days free for our shared conversations.

Sunday 10th

After the usual bash at the Minster - highlight Psalm 150 at the end - we returned to campus for our shared conversations on human sexuality. The format was well constructed although some felt that the initial pace was a little slow. I suppose compared to the cauldron of Synod debating it was but it allowed for some time for reflection and for some to catch up on the Wimbledon Men's final as well as the Euro 2016 final between France & Portugal!!

The first few sessions were about describing our own faith journeys. These were shared in groups of 3 or 4.

Monday 11th

We continued to work together in small groups after having some very insightful exposition of scripture from differing perspectives. Our next task was to share a personally important text - I chose *Genesis 2 v 18*. After lunch we had further presentations from different perspectives - some young LGBTI people, some adults from differing backgrounds (gay and straight) and some people from around the Anglican Communion. We were then invited to reflect on what we had heard.

Tuesday 12th

Our conversations came to an end with some small group reflections on the whole event followed by a plenary.

The Conversations were governed by the St Michael's House Protocols which ensured that "radio silence" was maintained during the sessions and that Social Media was absent from our lives. No further reporting of the event is permissible other than generalities or unattributable details.

For me the event was a tremendous opportunity to be with those with whom I profoundly disagree and it resulted in our finding each other capable of disagreeing without rancour. There were occasional misunderstandings between group members but they were readily dispelled.

The subject is enormous and will need to be chopped up into more manageable chunks if we are to make progress. It is certain that we will have to have a common language to ensure that discussion takes place with understanding. We will then be able to take the various elements and ensure that we have common definitions of the key elements where we have differences. We will need to value the differences between us as we explore common ground and attempt to identify and affirm such commonality.

Conclusion

We are a much better informed set of members as a result of sharing our hopes and fears and exposing personal stories and insights. Sadly some sought not to be fully engaged and so their perspective on the "Great Matter" will not form part of our education.

The purpose of the Conversations was to ensure that each of us better understood each other's position. If some do not engage their voice is not heard and we are all the poorer for that.

The House of Bishops will reflect on the whole experience and decide what, if anything, to bring before Synod in February.

As we began to head for home there was a good buzz from the assembled masses which I took to mean that Synod was in good heart. The conversations had generally gone very well and we must give thanks for the professionalism of the facilitators and David Porter and his whole team.

Tim Hind

Bath & Wells