

REPORT FROM GENERAL SYNOD – NOVEMBER 2013

Monday 18th

Well, would we or wouldn't we? The Synod started to gather for a 3 day marathon in which we were going to engage with each other at least once a day on the matter of the Consecration of Women to the Episcopate. Would the outcome be different this time around compared to last November's bruising encounters?

For some us there was a small item of business to be processed in the House of Laity. Part of the fall-out from the previous November had been a requisitioned meeting (held in January) which proposed a vote of no confidence in the chair. He survived but the event highlighted some defects in our Standing Orders. We have done some work on this and this needed debating. With a small tweak most of the proposals went through and so now it will be more difficult to requisition a meeting, we won't have to have electronic voting but by contrast papers will be able to be distributed electronically. The House was lukewarm to having co-options!

The full Synod meeting included all the usual gripping stuff about new members (including Bath & Wells replacement for Cherida Stobart in the person of Christina Baron), Business Committee Report on the Agenda, progress on statutory instruments and Questions.

The first substantial motion was a Miscellaneous Provisions Measure. The purpose of this is to gather up a significant number of small legislative changes of a host of different topics. This was the largest one ever done but because it typically attracts the anoraks of synod who were all broadly happy it didn't take very long!

The highlights of the afternoon were a [presentation](#) by the Archbishop of Canterbury on his worldwide duties and a very encouraging debate on the work done by the Bishops of St Albans, Sheffield & Chelmsford on Intentional Evangelism. In the former, Justin Welby told us of his visits following the Nairobi attacks, his offer to visit Pakistan after the Peshawar terrorist attacks and attendance at the World Council of Churches as well as GAFCON (well he happened to be passing by at the time).

In the intentional evangelism debate we agreed to promote a Task Group for Evangelism and proactive discussion within each Parish each year on the matter – and not just talking the talk (but walking ...). Everyone was being mindful of the decline following the decade of evangelism in George Carey's archiepiscopacy.

We also had a very good presentation on where we were on the Women in the Episcopate legislation, including an insight into the fineness of balance in terms of the various groups that have been engaged so far. The Bishop of Rochester outlined the format of the package and the way in which we would engage in small groups on the next day and then debate it on Wednesday.

Tuesday 19th

This was always going to be the first test of whether the atmosphere at synod had changed. We were meeting in small groups in Church House or Lambeth Palace to discuss, informally but using Chatham House Rules, the proposals for the consecration of women. I believe that each group was chaired by a member of the House of Bishops and facilitated by a member of the Steering Group. Taking place in the Guard Room of Lambeth Palace, my group had the very reflective Bishop of Peterborough and Maggie Swinson leading us to tease out how we felt about the new proposals and what if any were the likely showstoppers. I found the group session very useful and was relieved that nothing seemed to emerge which was not already on the horizon. Certainly there had been a significant mood swing in the last year.

After another anorak moment brilliantly put through by Charles George (Draft Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction (Amendment) Measure) we were entertained by Ian Fletcher in a follow up to the work done to amalgamate Bradford, Wakefield and Ripon & Leeds. Although not exclusive to the situation, the result of the work was looking like we would have a new Diocese of Leeds. This didn't fit well with the culture of the new Diocese which did not genuinely look to Leeds as a centre. It was already being informally called the Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales (WYAD for short). Our current legislation didn't allow for a Region to be included in the title of a Diocese and so we now, thanks to this debate, have the opportunity to call a Diocese after a City, Major Town or Geographical Area. (Note: The so-called Diocese of Europe is in fact the Diocese of Gibraltar in Europe).

The Archbishop of York gave a magnificent presidential address in which he spoke about Poverty & Justice. The full text is available by following this link. His description of spreading the gospel in the style of St Francis is a particularly powerful illustration.

Church Schools have the opportunity to step up to the mark and occupy the space generated by the vacuum produced by changes to national education policy in recent years. Building on two reports, "The Church School of the Future" and "A DBE for the Future", the Bishop of Oxford encouraged the Church to engage with the process to get prepared at Diocesan and Parish level to leverage the advantage over the coming years.

More exciting legislative stuff on Ecclesiastical Property and Vacancy in See Committees were put to Synod as a spot of dull relief between the more substantial debates.

The final debate on Tuesday was an attempt by London Diocese to change the workings of General Synod. The problem with many of these Diocesan motions is that there is always a time lag between them getting to the General Synod and being put on the agenda. There was undoubted support for change but it was also clear that tackling this, without the context of the other debates going on (House of Laity representation & overall organisational structure of the CofE) coupled with the increasingly innovative ways that are being introduced within our current processes and procedures, would not be a good use of our time at present. However, many other good thoughts about change were aired and all of those will now be borne in

mind by the Business Committee and Appointments Committee chairs as we move forward.

Wednesday 20th

So the day arrived; the anniversary of last year's "train crash". How would it go?

We started with a Eucharist in which I had the privilege of leading the intercessions. Although I regularly carry out this task in my own parish, following a sermon from the Archbishop of Canterbury isn't part of my normal situation. No pressure then! The eucharist had been moved to the Wednesday especially to enable a prayerful focus to be given to the following debates.

The new proposals are vastly simpler than the legislation proposed last time. They consist of a Measure (which allows Bishops to be appointed of either gender and continues to allow women to be priests while repealing the 1993 legislation), a Declaration by the House of Bishops (which will declare their agreement to behave appropriately) and an amending Canon (consequential changes including a new Canon for the provision of a dispute resolution procedure supported by the appointment of an Independent Reviewer). Previously such a package would not have been contemplated because the mood had been such that the mistrust of the House of Bishops had been "palpable". Last year's events had brought everyone up short and the facilitated discussions over the twelve months since have started to restore that trust.

It was refreshing to hear warm (although occasionally cautious) words emanating from both sides of the previous divides. Areas still need to be worked on in terms of Oaths and Jurisdiction in particular. Showstoppers have been finely described and worked round. The overwhelming response of Ayes 378 and Noes 8 with 25 Abstentions was very significant.

These matters take their toll on individuals and some bear a greater brunt than others. The gracious way in which the Bishop of Rochester has dealt with this is to be commended. As a member of his diocese said "vote for this if for no other reason – we want our bishop back!".

We subsequently voted for revision of the legislation to take place on the floor of the Synod in February. This is important because the 3 elements form a unified package which it would be unwise to deal with as separate elements. If all goes well it could mean that the Dioceses will be invited to look at this legislation during spring of next year and for final approval to be taken as early as July 2014. Subsequent activity within the legislative committee and ecclesiastical committee would herald the possibility of a first appointment of a woman to the episcopate in 2015.

However, it must be noted that we have all been warned to keep the champagne on ice, if not on the rack, until such time as we have continued down the road a little further. It has all been encouraging but as someone said in 1966 "it's not over yet!".

Bizarrely we followed this with a debate on the way in which House of Laity elections take place. An attempt to remove the electoral responsibility away from deanery synods was defeated. We agreed to allow laity nominations to Synod to be by email by 2015 and for electronic voting for the House of Laity to be available from 2020.

This synod has been extraordinary, having included high spots and aspects similar to watching paint dry. Overall it has been heartening to see synod in good form. Enjoy the moment while recognising the dangers of complacency. February – here we come!

Tim Hind

Bath & Wells