

General Synod, Westminster, November 2015

Monday 23rd

The members of the 10th General Synod began to gather at Church House for what had been designed as an induction day for new members but which contained a large amount of useful refreshment for returning members as well.

The morning session contained much useful information and the afternoon included a role play of a debate which brought out of retirement some of the previous synod members. This saw David Houlding and Christina Rees as the Archbishops of Canterbury & York and Sue Johns, Susan Cooper, Philip Giddings and Charles Razzall played a number of roles including characters from many Synods ago such as Hilda of Whitby and the Venerable Bede. It was all very entertaining but meant that a lot of good practice was highlighted through the good and bad practice displayed.

One highlight of the day was the presentation on Communication. In the run up to Synod there was a focus on the controversy over the banning of the showing of an advert for prayer that was due to be shown before the new Star Wars film. This gave an edge to the presentation which looked at both internal and external communication of the events and import of the Synod. The main message was "don't necessarily believe what you see in the papers because they sometimes have their own agenda!"

We were also introduced to the new voting machines and given an excellent presentation on security. Meeting as we were so shortly after the atrocities in Paris & Mali, there was an heightened awareness of the need for security. This was going to be a timely reminder as we were heading off to the Abbey the following morning where Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh would be in attendance.

John Spence entertained us with a review of the Reform & Renewal programme and David Porter & Sandra Cobbin gave us an insight into the progress of the Shared Conversations in a session entitled "Handling Disagreement". These were to give synod a reminder of the two big topics that will be occupying our time over the next year or two.

The new Synod will be very different to the previous one if only because of the larger than normal turnover. It appears that five years ago there was a smaller turnover as some hung on to be part of the push to deal with Women Bishops. Job done (or in some cases "not done") they departed. There are some dioceses where all of the laity members are new and others where the clergy are all new. There are around 100 new members in each of the Houses of Clergy and Laity.

This will bring new dynamics into play and create a different atmosphere to the proceedings. All very welcome.

Tuesday 24th

The morning was taken up with the attempt to shift 500 people through Church House, into Westminster Abbey and back again in sufficiently orderly fashion through Dean's Yard.

The Dioceses gather, Olympic Games style, in order to process into the Abbey with their Bishop at the head of the grouping and with the clergy and laity following on, Ark style, two by two. With 42 dioceses and other groupings for Deans and ecumenical guests etc this takes a while.

Prebendary Stephen Lynas (as Pro-prolocutor for Canterbury) and I were in the procession of Officers and so brought up the rear of the initial wave of processions. Subsequent gatherings of Abbey Choir, Visiting Dignitaries, Abbey Chapter, Archbishops and Royal Family formed the next phase of perambulations.

The sermon was delivered by the Preacher to the Papal Household. He reminded us through an exposition on Haggai Chapter 1 that, whilst the individual Christian denominations were tending their own houses, the House of God itself was being neglected. We need unity - especially at a time when people are being martyred - not because they are Anglican or Catholic but because they are Christian. He looked forward to the time when we would be commemorating the Reformation (Luther's thesis was in 1517) and seeing a change to the way the churches work together for the common good.

I was very lucky as, sitting in the front seats of the North Lantern just below the pulpit and straight opposite the Royal party, I was able to hear the sermon well. However, his strong accent and the sound system within the abbey meant that a lot of people had to wait for the transcript before being able to understand what he was saying.

After the service, synod moved back to Church House and we had the formal inauguration of the synod. A very amusing speech from the Archbishop of Canterbury, in which he did a brief retrospective of Her Majesty's involvement in the 10 synod inaugurations and contrasted it with some of her predecessors less than fulsome commitment, was followed by the Queen's equally engaging response and reflection on the need for unity. Duty done, she departed and we broke for lunch.

So, a day and a half into the period set aside for synod and proper proceedings started in the afternoon with usual introductions, progress of measures and debate on the agenda. We were also privileged to have an excellent presidential address from Archbishop Justin in which he talked up some of the issues that face us and the way in which we can deal with difference. Urging us to "build together" and using a plumb line to illustrate the need for a point of reference against which to measure our practise he called again for unity which has been a theme through all the major speeches so far.

This quinquennium we have a new chaplain responsible for the worship and the care of synod members. He spent a little while talking about his role and the way in which worship would take place.

As this was a new synod there is a need for spending a little time on catch-up - especially for new members. Although we had had a very useful presentation on Reform & Renewal at the induction session on Monday, it was important that we had a more in depth presentation of the progress being made and the intricacies of how it fits together. And so we had our second dose of John Spence and contributions from the Bishops of Sheffield and Willesden.

Question Time has evolved swiftly over the last few sessions and this time - with fewer questions and smarter standing orders - we swept through questions and actually finished ahead of schedule! Almost a first.

In the evening I attended a fringe meeting held by The Children's Society around the issues facing older children - including sexual exploitation and neglect.

Wednesday 25th

This was a full day of synod followed by a meeting of the House of Laity.

After the Archbishop of Canterbury had persuaded us to deliver a Loyal Address (as is customary) to Her Majesty The Queen, we had a very entertaining presentation from The Archbishop of York and his wife, Margaret, following their recent trip to Samoa, Fiji & Tonga. Although it was colourful (Sentamu's clothes, for example) and entertaining (Margaret's insights), the presentation was to highlight the issue of Global Warming through accounts of the aftermath of the Tsunami,

20 years ago. They concluded by urging us all to become "major players in the debates" and to take action on climate change.

The next debate for us was, however, even more poignant as it was about the immediate issues relating to migrants. The Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler, led us through the complexity of the migrant situation and included those issues that are not hitting our shoreline because the migration is not heading for Europe. Almost 60 million individuals have been displaced worldwide by persecution, conflict or generalised violence. Twenty percent of these are due to the Syrian crisis alone. We are being urged to respond to this in every parish in the land, to challenge the government to go well beyond their current commitment to take 20,000 refugees over 5 years, to ensure that this is recognised as having a component that is driven by religiously motivated persecution and to ensure that safe escape routes are provided. The Archbishop of Canterbury reminded us that this latter commitment would mean military intervention of some scale was necessary.

An amendment which encouraged the government to respond to the crisis relating to those migrants who were already within the EU (with particular concern for those with family in the UK) was passed. This would mean an attempt to deal not just with those in camps in Syria and surrounds but also those in the so-called "Jungle" at Calais.

Just to prove to the new members that synod has to deal with the nitty-gritty of church administration, we followed this with a debate on the Ecclesiastical Judges, Legal Officers and Others (Fees) Order. Gripping stuff!

With the words of our Communication Team ringing in our ears from Monday, we were given an opportunity to hear what the papers had reported badly in relation to the Talking Jesus research. The press had grabbed a few headlines and tried to spin it negatively. The presentation that we received on the Public Perceptions of Jesus was definitely a series of home truths but quite clearly was a chance to learn how better to engage in the public square with matters of faith.

The afternoon was spent on a debate relating to the report of the Church Buildings Review Group. Once again this had been poorly reported in the press. In particular, they had focused on the difficulties associated with Festival Churches. The Bishop of Worcester advised that the section of the report which related to these churches was all about how to ensure that these churches could be used imaginatively to allow community use at times other than festivals. This report needs to be read in full and isn't easy to summarise in a short sentence or two. It is available on the General Synod website.

William Fittall has been our Secretary General for 13 years and is now retiring. The Archbishop of Canterbury gave a very amusing address while knowing that William had a right of reply. His speech included some of William's memorable contributions to synod. He (++ Justin) commented on how he (William) was able to navigate through problems so well that a new word had been introduced into the language of Synod - to be fitallised! He also showed members a photograph from the Quinquennial Revue where William played the part of a disorderly intern in the Staff sketch.

William reminded us of comments made by Margaret Thatcher when describing the need for every Prime Minister to have an ally like Willie Whitelaw. In saying that she had been a little unguarded in her speech on the matter, he went on to say that when he had explained this to the Archbishops he hadn't expected them necessarily to appoint another William.

Nevertheless, it had been good to have the new Secretary General, William Nye, (or William II as he will inevitably be known) present throughout the 3 days. We look forward to the undoubted

skills that he will bring to synod - having been Principal Private Secretary for 4 years to HRH Prince Charles before taking on this new role.

The House of Laity had to stay behind after all the rest had gone to engage with the election process for the Chair & Vice-Chair of the House and the elections to Archbishops' Council. The Chair & Vice-Chair are automatically *ex-officio* on the Council. There were 16 candidates for the 3 places. I won't go into the complexity of the voting process but the result will be announced in two stages. The Chair & Vice-Chair elections will be dealt with first and the results announced just before Christmas. Subsequent election for the two Council places will happen after that. This is to allow reflection of the initial election as sometimes people feel the need to alter their voting to allow for balance to be achieved within the council.

The House of Laity Standing Committee is made up of these 4 people plus others *ex-officio* from the results of elections to other bodies (Business Committee and Appointments Committee) and so the full Committee will not be known until early spring 2016.

It was a very good synod, in my view, with great hope for the future. It was brilliant to see many of the new members of synod getting stuck into the debates and even putting themselves forward for election. Next stop - February 2016!

Tim Hind

Bath & Wells