

Report from General Synod – February 2017

A foretaste of the week ahead came shortly after 3pm on the Monday afternoon. As usual, synod opened with a report from the Business Committee. This led to the first of the ‘take note’ motions of the week: procedurally these enable members to speak and for the powers-that-be to test the temperature. This motion was carried, but not without some considerable venting of steam in anticipation of the business scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. There was considerable anxiety expressed on behalf of LGBT members that the group work planned for then would not be a safe environment. The Bishops’ report following the shared conversations on human sexuality felt like a door slammed to some and there was considerable disappointment and anger in the air, expressed in speeches and personalised somewhat in some exchanges that involved leading members of synod. This in turn led to feelings expressed that it was difficult to air more traditional viewpoints when such strong emotions were around. Wednesday afternoon was not going to be easy.

The first major debate was a response to the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation and – following the tone being set by the Lutheran and partner churches in Germany – welcomed the convergence of churches in their understanding of the doctrine of justification and the initiatives being taken in working across historic divides for the furtherance of the gospel. Some speakers felt that the rejoicing in the spiritual inheritance of the Reformation was a little lukewarm and the motion was amended so as to express more unalloyed thankfulness for those 15th century rediscoveries.

The Archbishop of Canterbury’s presidential address was a call to reflect on the aftermath of Brexit and Trump and for us to seize the opportunity of contributing to ‘reimagining a new Britain’. ‘This is... a moment of challenge,’ he said, ‘but challenge that as a nation can be overcome with the right practices, values, culture and spirit. This could be a time of liberation, of seizing and defining the future, or it could be one in which the present problems seize our national future and define us. Which is where we come in. I don’t mean we, the church of England, are the answer. But we can be part of the answer: we have a voice and a capacity and a reach and, above all, a Lord who is faithful when we fail and faithful when we flourish.’

During the week two significant farewells were made: to Sir Andreas Whittam-Smith, who as First Church Estates Commissioner has, during his 15 years in office, overseen assets grow from £3.5 billion to £8 billion whilst distributing £3.5 billion for the ministry and mission of the Church of England, and to the Rt Revd Richard Chartres, who as Bishop of London has been responsible for a diocese that, against the national trend, has seen church growth and a reversal of decline.

A private members’ motion on Tuesday morning sought to remove the responsibility of legal preliminaries to marriage from clergy, replacing banns and licences by universal civil preliminaries arranged by civil registrars. Those supporting the motion spoke of the increasing complexity of administering legal preliminaries (recent legislation has limited banns to British and European Economic Area citizens and has required couples to produce evidence of citizenship); those against were wary of throwing away the pastoral opportunities of reading banns and the encouragement it gives to attending church. The motion was lost in all three houses, but not by a substantial majority, as there were good arguments made on both sides.

The rest of Tuesday was taken up with what was mostly uncontroversial tidying-up legislation much of which was voted for with Soviet-style unanimity.

Wednesday morning began with the approval of the creation of a new suffragan see in the diocese of Leicester. Those who might have been prepared to challenge 'yet another central post' were assured early on that the effect of the proposal was financially neutral, there already being a stipended assistant bishop in the diocese. The newish Bishop of Leicester, who had (I thought) looked a little sheepish in moving his motion, was therefore not disappointed and could look forward to sharing a glass of something with the Bishop-to-be of Loughborough after forthcoming soul-stretching diocesan synod meetings.

We then moved to a substantial motion and debate on the issue of fixed odds betting machines. If this was scheduled as an attempt to set a tone of unanimity and common purpose early on in the day then it was successful indeed. This was synod moving quickly into top gear and purring, stories from street pastors and from the confessional (anonymised) reminding us that we were not talking about a £2 a ticket raffle at the village fete, but addictive gambling where debts of tens of thousands of pounds can be racked up. The final motion urged the government to reduce from £100 to £2 the maximum amount that can be wagered in such machines and to give local authorities the power to limit their number. It was passed with 310 voting in favour and none against (with no abstentions).

The next business saw two significant amending canons progress to their final stage: these would give greater freedom to ministers to dispense with wearing robes or vestments in church services and would remove the canon that restricts the type of funeral service used for suicides (a canon largely ignored by clergy anyway).

So we all went to lunch with a warm glow and united in heart and mind.

The afternoon saw synod members divide into groups (as referred to above) to consider case studies around the church's response to those in same-sex relationships. These groups were led by members of the House of Bishops and boycotted by a small but significant number of synod members. The so-called St Michael's House protocols were in force that limit what members are free to share concerning the discussions. My one comment is that I thought our group had to work hard to keep going; it lacked the considerable freedom and honesty of the facilitated conversations of last July. By the time synod had reassembled formally for the 'take note' debate the atmosphere was tense and emotions high.

With the criticism that the bishops' report had received leading up to synod, the bishops were somewhat apologetic about it from the word go. The chair of the Bishops' Reflection Group, the Bishop of Norwich, introduced the debate with a tone and historical perspective that I suspect won over a number of critics. 160 members had asked to speak and a wide range of views and perspectives were aired. The first to speak was the Archdeacon of Dudley, the Ven Nikki Groarke. Though she pledged to vote for taking note of the report she expressed surprise that it did not support pastoral services to bless those in same-sex relationships, and expressed regret that as someone (an open evangelical) in the 'silent middle' she had not spoken up earlier. It was perhaps the debate within the evangelical wing of the church that was crucial in deciding the overall outcome. The liberal catholic mind was made up ages ago; the swing states are in the evangelical constituency. Some, such as Andrea Minichiello Williams and Susie Leafe, spoke and voted against taking note because they thought the report too liberal; others, such as the gay-but-celibate Ed Shaw and Sam Allbery, spoke passionately and movingly of their own conservative convictions and urged us to support the bishops and take note. The Bishop of Liverpool, though loyally committed to voting for the motion, made it clear that his sympathies were with LGBT people who 'see in this report hard stones when they wanted bread'. The Bishop of

Blackburn, a conservative on these matters, insisted that LGBT people had been listened to even if they had not got what they wanted. Jayne Ozanne is an open evangelical who is now openly lesbian and has led the campaign in synod for a new inclusion for LGBT people; she urged the synod, and its bishops, to accept the fact that we disagree and need to live with disagreement. Canon Simon Butler, also an open evangelical who has come out as gay, drew the biggest applause of the afternoon as he also urged good but workable disagreement. He concluded by saying that at worship the night before this verse had come to him: 'I will not let you go until you bless me' (Genesis 32.6).

At the end of the debate a point of order requested that voting be in houses; this was accepted and the Bishops (by 43 to 1) and Laity (by 106 to 83) voted to take note of the report whilst the Clergy (by 100 votes to 93) voted against and therefore the motion was lost. The Bishop of Coventry will now be forever remembered for accidentally pressing the wrong button, but he wasn't the only one. A clergy friend of mine meant to vote against but in fact voted for; he is also from the Diocese of Coventry. What do they put in the water in those parts?

On the Thursday morning we heard from the Secretary-General of the Anglican Communion, Archbishop Idowu-Fearon. It was not clear whether he had changed any of his speech following the vote the day before, but he set a peace-building tone, assuring us of the enormous affection with which the Church of England is held in the wider Anglican world as their 'elder sister church'. He was clear that changing attitudes to 'make people safe' was as important as our debates, and he assured us that 'brothers and sisters, your struggles are our struggles'.

A final debate saw some unity return to our debating and voting. The Chief Executive of the Church Army, Mark Russell, introduced the report *Setting God's People Free*, which was about helping 'the 98% of the Church of England who are not ordained'. As a consequence of this report, and the action which the motion he was proposing committed the church to, he expected to hear in ten years' time 'stories of parishes and dioceses, of nurses and postmen, of paramedics and sales assistants, chefs and farmers... able to make connections between theology and their everyday lives, more confident in their faith... more confident in their vocation, as lay people, to join God in his mission to transform our nation and our world.' Not much to argue about there. We left with a little more cheer (and glad that we were let out early; we had had enough debating).

Nick Moir