

General Synod Report, York, 7- 10 July 2017

Friday 7 July

It had been decided to adopt a different approach to the sessions which meant close of play each day was 7pm. But this was only in terms of core synod business. As a result loads of stuff - fringe meetings and the like - spread out to fill the vacuum.

We started early afternoon with the usual debate on the agenda and wove our way through a series of debates until we hit questions which needed to finish at by 7pm. The main debate of this session was to be what had been perceived as a "motherhood & apple pie" motion on the state of the nation. This turned into an opportunity for some to exercise their right to add "baubles" onto the motion to air their particular hobby horses. In the end all the add-ons were resisted (including one from the proposer). This left the original motion intact. The motion was one which laid out general principles to be established following the General Election and the Brexit Referendum for praying for and lobbying for cohesive policies from all parties to work for the common good (amongst other things).

Prior to this showcase debate the Agenda debate had generated more heat than light in relation to sexuality matters. The key protagonists on both sides raised concerns about each other's stances. There were a few fireworks here. Synod accepts that people's passion for their cause needs to be expressed but are quite rightly intolerant of abusive or inappropriate statements. This flowed over into the state of the nation debate a little bit.

The other matters debated were preparatory debates to final drafting on the two amending canons proposing change to

- (i) the dress code for occasional offices and
- (ii) the liturgy to be used in the situation where a suicide has taken place.

These went through almost on the nod. Questions were dominated by sexuality and safeguarding questions.

Saturday 8 July

Today was a very strange and very long day.

We kicked off with a presentation on the two new groups that have been set up to deal with interim matters following the February debate. One group is to look at the way in which pastoral guidelines can be prepared to deal with same sex issues. The other is building a teaching document to effectively replace in due course the (in)famous "Issues" document in the light of legislative changes regarding Equal Marriage.

This was followed by a really good debate on the Presence & Engagement programme which deals with multi-faith cohesion. Several years on from the Bradford riots which sparked the initial Presence & Engagement research and following a very successful Near Neighbours programme which has helped to defuse tensions and cement relationships in many areas, it was timely to review what needs to happen in the future.

Some essential legislative work was despatched quite quickly and before lunch we were introduced to the workshops we going to be engaging in, in the afternoon.

After lunch we were invited to attend a workshop of our choice! Six events were planned to cover six of the many strands being developed centrally to provide materials to support parishes locally in mission.

The six workshops focussed on Thy Kingdom Come, Life Events, Digital Evangelism, National events as opportunities for community witness, Inclusion and Outreach to the marginalised & Crossing the Generations. I was sceptical that we should necessarily be concentrating on these elements when clearly the Church of England has had such bad press recently on issues of safeguarding that maybe we haven't the credibility to preach our gospel into the Market Place. However, the group work went very well from all accounts.

The workshops were followed by a debate on progress being made on creating central resources to support mission and asking for dioceses and parishes to engage with these areas of work enthusiastically!

From time to time we have Private Members Motions (PMM) and Diocesan Synod Motions (DSM) brought to the fore. The first of these this session was Jayne Ozanne's (Oxford) PMM asking for the Synod to agree to endorse a 2017 statement from the UK Council for Psychotherapy and others regarding Conversion Therapy. It also called on the Archbishops' Council to become a cosignatory.

This could have been a powder keg of a debate, given that many who oppose such an endorsement might use it as a proxy debate on general issues of sexuality. With a number of amendments designed rein in the proposal all being argued quite calmly we wove our way through to a point of endorsing a Memorandum of Understanding from two years earlier (and, crucially, signed by the Royal College of Psychiatrists) and additionally calling on the Government to ban the practice of Conversion Therapy. During the debate the amendments got varying levels of support but broadly the closest received just over 40% of the votes. The final motion was supported by 80% of Synod.

There was a House of Laity meeting in the evening which looked at Clergy Wellbeing, the Crown Nominations Commission (CNC) (elections coming up this year) and Setting God's People Free.

This was followed by an uproarious Open Synod Quiz which raised £300 for charity.

Sunday 9 July

If the highlight of Saturday in York is the Quiz, the highlight of Sunday in York is the Choir of York Minster singing Psalm 150. The rest of the service is spectacular but that is the pinnacle.

In the afternoon the Synod could have been accused of getting down to sex again. The previous night's debate on Conversion Therapy was really a Safeguarding Issue although the practice was only ever going to be used "against" those who were or perceived themselves as being gay. As someone said very few instances of heterosexual folk being counselled to become gay. This second debate was a diocesan Synod motion from Blackburn Diocese calling on the House of Bishops to

consider the introduction of liturgy to support the life event for Transgender people who have completed gender transition.

This was therefore not about sex but about a gender issue. It was predominantly about welcoming people into a new life which enables them to move on with a new name and a new sense that they are in their correct gender.

It was pointed out that this was not a rebaptism. It was also pointed out that practices currently being used to mark these life events by tweaking existing liturgy were not satisfactory in all cases. One person spoke of someone who had been baptised coming to confirmation shortly after receiving their transition certificate and that this was a happy coincidence.

There was a very cleverly crafted amendment that attempted to push the whole debate into the long grass (there is an enormous amount of long grass in the Church of England) but which in the end commanded less than 40% support.

The vote on the unamended motion secured almost 80% in favour.

The middle of the afternoon saw a presentation with questions on the Crown Nominations Commission (CNC) and a good debate on Clergy Wellbeing.

The CNC is an important facet of our church processes. Clergy Wellbeing is a subject that many Dioceses are addressing at present. The fact that many of us on Synod were new two years ago meant that both were a good education as well as a timely reminder to older hands. The day concluded with a call through another Private Members Motion for changes to be made to Schools Admission policies for those in tied accommodation. Although Tiffer Robinson's (St Edmundsbury & Ipswich) PMM was being branded by some as preferential treatment for clergy kids, it was clear that this had a wider reach covering those in academic post, agricultural workers and many more (e.g. a school caretaker was mentioned).

Monday 10 July

The last day of our Synod was going to be a long day for many. Despite the fact that a new timetable had been adopted, the change to the schedule had only really benefitted people on the Friday and Sunday. The House of Laity meeting had meant that Saturday was as long as ever and Monday's agenda completing at 4:30 pm meant that a large number of Synod members would be attempting to get home the same day.

We were treated to a very useful insight into the exorbitant cost associated with applying for British Citizenship thanks to a DSM from Birmingham Diocese. Horror stories regarding the way in which people who clearly want to integrate within our society were being dissuaded through the cost and the complexity of the process.

The Elections Review Group presented us with thoughts about ways in which our elections to synod might change. Two aspects are of particular concern - electronic voting and the electoral college for the House of Laity. The latter was the subject of a straw poll being carried out via STV (Single Transferrable Vote) on whether to keep Deanery Synod as the electoral college or to

replace it with one of three options. It also explore whether to go for universal suffrage based on parochial electoral rolls.

The rest of the day was spent taking the two amending canons from Friday through their final approval stages and dealing with (i) reports on the activities of the Church Commissioners and the Archbishops' Council and (ii) the budget and apportionment proposals for 2018.

The Archbishop of Canterbury gave send off speeches of great hilarity to the Bishops of Bristol and Lambeth before we were prorogued.

Most whom I have spoken to during and after the synod were of the opinion that this was one of the best synods they have been to. The fact that we had had some prickly moments on Friday had led to Synod members lowering the level of irritability for the rest of the session. From Saturday morning through to close of play on Monday there was an improved ambience and a good deal of good humoured debate.

The Archbishop of York came up for special commendation from many for his positive "last words" in several of the key debates. So much so that someone asked where the real Archbishop had been hidden! Obviously, they could say that - but I couldn't possibly comment!

Simon Talbott