

General Synod, Westminster, February 2011

Monday 7th February

What a difference an election makes! I nearly entitled this piece "The loneliness of a backbencher". All will be revealed.

Actually since my removal from the backbenches it has been very busy with a meeting of the Archbishops' Council and a flurry of activity to prepare for the House of Laity events for the Synod Session. It is exciting to be part of a body like the Council and you don't realise that you become automatically on the Legislative Committee and as the agenda and minutes of other bodies descend into your inbox you wonder what the extent of your ex-officio roles might be. Will my filing system cope?

I hadn't expected to chair one of the more contentious debates of the sessions and it became clear to me quite early on that there was a good chance that the cooption motion might fail. I thought it wouldn't be as close as it was – 65.1% in favour – and so falling short by only 1.5%!!! The result has meant that we are unable to take advantage of a very talented person who would have done a great job. Having said that it was invidious for the House of Laity to be put into this position and I will defend the right of the House of Laity to come to its own decisions on matters of cooption. I am sure that a solution will be found to ensure that we aren't put into a similar position again.

Synod proper started with the usual introduction of new members – it amazes me the high turnover of members as we have only been going since November. Then we had a bit of pageantry as the new officers were paraded and after shaking hands with the presidents were able to take their places on the platform – with the Vice Chair of the House of Laity allowed pride of place on his own behind the Prolocutors and the Chair. It isn't actually as bad as it looks but something will hopefully be done to redress the inequity. One thing for sure is that one gets a totally different perspective and the acoustics are such that one has more difficulty hearing some of the quieter speakers (human, sic) because of the angle of the speakers (electronic).

We were fortunate in having Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell, Secretary for State for International Development, to address us on the subject of his work and to be reassured that the Aid budget would be maintained at 0.7% of GDP. He gave a very graphic account of a visit to Africa where, when he asked what the knocking noises were, he was told it was from the increasing industry of coffin-makers. When he thanked the Chancellor for maintaining the budget the three word answer that he received was "Spend it wisely". In response the Archbishop of Canterbury said it was clear that Faith Groups must give unconditionally to aid the disadvantaged but asked the question as to how things can be done locally when funding and resources are slender.

The debate on the agenda raised a few interesting issues. There was always going to be a request for some statement if not a debate on the situation in the Middle East and especially Egypt. Some took the opportunity suggest that we needed to have some action on declining moral values – typically prompted by some members views on the issues that have arisen out of the recent story of the owners of a guest house

in Cornwall refusing to allow a gay couple to stay. I declare an interest at this point as the two men are work colleagues and they are two of the nicest people you could wish to meet.

John Ward's motion requesting that we need to have a 2/3rds majority for the adoption of the Anglican Covenant when it returns to Synod only received a 2/5ths vote in favour and so was lost. We moved into Question Time and even though it looked at one stage that we would have time to complete them all it didn't work out. This was mainly due to the spectacular failure of the electronic voting system on a vote by houses on the previous motion requiring us to do it the old-fashioned way by walking through doors. I still believe that we should be given the questions as we arrive on the Monday and then have Question Time on, say, the Tuesday evening.

In the evening I attended a very lively meeting of the Open Synod Group. Caroline Spencer is now acting Chairman for the group as I have taken a back seat to concentrate on my new duties and she started brilliantly.

Tuesday 8th February

We had a very positive morning of Communion followed by debates on the Draft Clergy Discipline (Amendment) Measure and its associated Amending Code of Practice under the Clergy Discipline Measure 2003. With the use of word measure to describe both the original Measure and the (Amendment) Measure and the fact we had amendments to the Amending Code of Practice it was a miracle that we all kept up with it. The great news is that the first debate was a first consideration and so after a spell in the Revision Committee it can come back and be debated again. A lot of good points were made and all the amendments to the Amending Code of Practice were passed. The morning concluded with a presentation by the Ethical Investment Advisory Group.

So the morning was a bit of calm before the storm.

Not that the Archbishop of York caused a storm with his Presidential Address. In it he described the need for the Church to be the part of the glue that holds society together. He stated that our privileged position is also the thing which creates the responsibility to minister to and to show solidarity with our fellow parishioners. He went on to talk about the work ethic and how it is vocational, social and liturgical. I think he used the word material rather than vocational but he meant that it was important to us remember our responsibility to be stewards of our natural inheritance.

Sentamu's down to earth address was followed by a call to look at the challenges before the church and synod over the next 5 years. There were 3 themes which prompted a lot of good discussion. These were

- contributing to the common good
- facilitating growth
- re-imagining ministry

The first of these was to engage with society as a church in key things such as social issues (welfare, community cohesion), life experiences (baptisms, weddings, funerals), education and environment. There was concern by one speaker that community cohesion frequently only related to ethnic diversity and should be expanded to cover the fractures in society caused by gender, sexuality, age, social deprivation etc. The other two themes were much more internal to how the church operates on its evangelistic imperative. How can we equip the church through resources (material and human) to grow as a church?

The most damaging debate was on the recommendation that the acting Chair of the Business Committee be appointed Chair. Synod was unhappy that this should happen and it became clear that, if it was put to a vote, the motion would be defeated. To avert this, a procedural motion was used to adjourn the debate. Some of the disquiet was that, as the proposed Chair was a Bishop, the independence of action for the committee may not be maintained. The damage was done.

The next debate was for the appointment of Colin Podmore as the new Clerk to the Synod. David Williams, the current Clerk, has served faithfully ever since the changes introduced by "Working as one Body". His wry sense of humour and quiet efficiency will be missed. With Colin's elevation and the House of Laity's cooption result from the day before this has meant that the Dioceses Commission have lost two valuable members.

We were given a little light relief with a wonderful presentation on the Wedding Project. This showed that a considerable reinforcement of the church's activity has been noticed through this venture. One little aside; I couldn't help but confuse the Chair of the Debate with one of the presenters – it was all in the tenor of the voice and the intonation. I trust that Archdeacon Annette and Bishop Paul will forgive me.

Some years ago now I served on the working party that devised the new Parochial Fees system. The measure is now ready to be enacted and has gone through Parliament. It is now time to consider how we might calculate the fees under the new system. We were presented with four key principles – justifiable, uniform, inclusive and affordable. We had a range of views on these and what they meant and this was illustrated by the fact that some were contradictory. For example, someone said that if we provided a quality product we should be able to attract a realistic fee. Others were rightly concerned that we should be exploiting people at a time of emotional difficulty – particularly funerals. Some were keen that the same service should cost the same wherever they were in the country and others felt that a uniform fee would be insufficient to cover heating some buildings during the winter. This was a debate designed to tease out ideas and so will now continue in revision committee.

Wednesday 9th February

When a person wishes to be ordained and is divorced and remarried during the lifetime of a former spouse, an investigation is carried out and a faculty is applied for to allow the ordination to take place. Up till now there has been no requirement for any further investigation on preferment to higher office. The debate this morning was to introduce the new guidelines from the House of Bishops to redress this. Several points of detail were made during the debate including the need for sensitivity if the

divorce had occurred prior to ordination to ensure that the previous investigation was taken into account while recognising that some further investigation would be required because of the greater responsibility that higher office. One significant point related to the need to include civil partnership failures as well as divorces in the guidance. A number of speeches asked that no provision should be made on the grounds that the existing provision which had been designed to be exceptional was now mainstream. Others countered this by stating that it was unrealistic to expect Bishops to be entirely flawless.

The debate that hit the headlines was about the need for a “scouse” baptism service. This overstates the issue but the principle was to enable the provision of wording which was more accessible than the very churchy wording that is in the service at the moment. The motion was quite modest in that asked for only a few areas to be looked at. Synod decided that it wanted to be more expansive and wanted all Initiation Provision to be looked at.

The final issue to be looked started with a presentation by George Stack (the Auxiliary Bishop in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster) and our own Bishop of Guildford.

It has taken 6 years to get this debate on to Synod’s agenda. The ARCIC Report Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ explores a way of looking at Mary which enables Anglicans to accept the theology underlying the two Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Both of these dogmas form a significant barrier to the movement towards unity for most Anglicans. It is suggested in the report that work on this would reduce these obstacles.

Synod rejected an amendment which would have strengthened the motion in terms of its welcoming of the report as a whole – leaving the motion as one which noted the report as a useful discussion point. Unfortunately we were pressed for time and the opportunity to discuss some of the amendments was not taken which means that not all facets of the arguments for and against were explored.

Personally, I feel that there are so many more important things that the church should be doing at this time and I hope that time will be treated like the Overseas Aid budget – “Spend it wisely”.

We said farewell to David Williams and to Shaun Farrell and also to the Bishop of Winchester. Sometimes the farewell speeches have been lacklustre (sometimes mildly amusing but sometimes very dull). The presidents need to be congratulated for having scripts that would have graced a show starring Rowan (Atkinson) and John (Sessions).

A good end to a rebellious Synod.

Tim Hind
Bath & Wells