

General Synod, Westminster, February 2015

Tuesday 10th

If the previous Synod was one of the most historic in our lifetime with the final events taking place to enable the consecration of women to the episcopate, then this Synod could have been expected to be an anticlimax. In fact it could prove to be the start of one of the most exciting phases in the church's history as it begins seriously to address its biggest issue - decline.

Over the last several decades the church has experienced an average 1% reduction in attendance each year. That doesn't sound like much but the cumulative effect over each decade is to reduce the attendance by just over 9%. Tot that up over several and you get the picture. Coupled with this is the significant departure over the next decade and a half over 40% of our current baby boomer clergy and the prospect of a steeper decline in the church seems inevitable unless something is done to address the issue.

Following a major report, "From Anecdote to Evidence", and subsequent research there have been some key factors identified which have now been embodied in a series of reports which are available on the Church of England website ([link](#)). These key factors lead to the need for a number of actions which include:

- Rediscovering the importance of discipleship,
- Reinvigorating the place of laity in leadership and ministry
- Removing the unnecessary burdens of bureaucracy and officialdom which prevent mission and growth
- Structuring central church resources better for the promotion of growth within dioceses
- Improving the way in which resources are spent on Ministerial education for both ordained and lay leaders
- Ensuring that central church funds are available to fund this major reform programme

With this in mind the structure of our 3 day synod had been significantly engineered to achieve an understanding of how this would all progress.

We started with worship and almost immediately had a very harrowing plea from our guest speaker regarding the plight of christians in Iraq. Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil told of the issues relating to displaced and refugee people who are fleeing from the ISIS threat. He said that in the 1940s the Jews were eradicated from the Chaldean region and now the Christians are on the verge of extinction as well. His plea was for our help to stop this from happening.

We had our usual agenda debate followed by a debate on the number of Synod seats available for each Diocese when we come to the elections to take place in the autumn this year. For Bath & Wells, this is unchanged.

In his presidential address the Archbishop of Canterbury urged the Church of England to approach evangelism and witness with "joy and delight". He went on to say that "Evangelism and witness are not strategies, let alone strategies for church survival. A church that looks for strategies to survive has lost the plot".

We had a delightful presentation from some of our senior women clergy - including an emotional moment when Libby Lane came to the platform - on the subject of the "Immersion Experience" in India. Although this sounds like an exploration of baptismal rites, it is in fact a mechanism for allowing people to engage with and learn about global issues and to report back with confidence. Recognising that our own church is beginning to revise the way in which its senior leaders are to be developed, this group linked up with Christian Aid to help understand some of the specific issues in India related to gender.

We had a short set of Legislative debates. Some were just to finish off some work on Amending Canons - electoral procedures and authorisation for holy communion. The most contentious was the need to spend legislative time on a measure which would allow a diocese to be named after a geographical area rather than a place. It was decided that it was already possible to allow for this without further legislation and so the measure failed to go through to the revision stage.

Then we had an unusual Question Time. This had been innovatively changed so that the answers didn't have to be read out. This meant that people, having had the answers in advance, were able to make improved interventions through supplementaries. It felt a little strange and repetitive ("I refer the questioner to the answer on the sheet!") but I suspect we will warm to it in due course.

Both Question Time and the Agenda Debate were peppered with somewhat negative comments about the way in which the Development & Leadership Report had been handled. This had been heightened by the fact that that morning had seen further adverse criticism of Lord Green (who had chaired the group that produced the report) following revelations about alleged Tax Avoidance services from HSBC.

The evening finished with presentations of the task group reports and an opportunity to hear more about the way the group work would take place on Wednesday morning.

Wednesday 11th

We started with worship in different small groups (about 20 in each group) separated across Church House and Lambeth Palace. In each group we had a paper on discipleship to discuss - focussing in our group on our own experience from childhood to the present day.

We moved to larger groups where we became part of a "hearing" on one of the 4 task group reports. I attended the one about Development & Leadership. This had been the most contentious of the reports and, because accountability lies with the Archbishops and House of Bishops, wasn't to be debated formally within Synod. The session was due to have the Bishop of Ely speak for around 15 minutes followed by a brief response from the Bishop of Coventry who was speaking as chair of the Faith & Order Advisory Commission which had

been responsible for the production of a similar paper. A mournful tweet after 30 minutes announced that "+Ely has stopped speaking, +Coventry has started speaking". The natives started to get restless but, despite that, skilful chairmanship led to a good discussion. In the session the theme, which had started during the agenda debate and carried on into questions the night before, of the development of lay ministry became ever more strident.

The afternoon was taken up with the debates on the major themes out of the task groups.

First, we had a debate on Discipleship which commended the Ten Marks for Developing Discipleship and encouraged the House of Bishops to prepare a new Revised Catechism and other resources for Discipleship.

The second debate invited us to support the way in which the church could reengineer its resourcing strategies to support mission and growth in the dioceses with a bias to the poor. It also recommended ways in which to reposition ministerial training to better effectiveness and included a reference to lay training. Once again the fact that this seemed to have been bolted on as an afterthought was brought out in several speeches.

The third debate was about making simplifications to the bureaucracy where such was strangling mission and growth opportunities. The Bishop of Willesdon tried his hardest to energise a Synod which was beginning to flag. To be fair, the pace quickened a touch.

Finally, the First Church Estates Commissioner explained why it was important for the Commissioners to break their intergenerational equity rules to facilitate the reform programme. While expecting the expenditure to be scrutinised thoroughly, as it would lead to a permanent reduction in Commissioners' distributions, he believed that it was important to do things really well rather than half-heartedly. This was he said a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to kick start the reform. He agreed that the purpose of the reforms was all about growth and that if it worked the costs spent now would be recovered.

All the debates, whilst airing some critical aspects, were positive towards "the direction of travel" and can give the Archbishops' Council and the House of Bishops comfort that they can work towards materials for the next steps - which will include Diocesan Roadshows.

The evening finished with worship before which some environmental activists draped a message over the balcony of synod as a demonstration and left singing. Some people thought it was another innovation as part of our worship!

A fringe meeting later enabled us to celebrate the completion of the Pilgrim Course.

Thursday 12th

With yesterday's excitement over we dived into a day of being entertained by Geoffrey Tattersall. Here is a man of many talents and for his sins, whatever they might be, he is the Chair of the Revision Committee for the Safeguarding Legislation, Chair of the Standing Orders Committee and also on the panel of chairs for Synod Debates. I suspect he couldn't believe his luck at being drawn to deliver all 3 roles on the same day.

His first act was to present the Safeguarding legislation and that went through with only small amendments to the measure and its accompanying Amending Canon.

Secondly, he presented the 50th Report of the Standing Orders Committee.

He was then allowed time off for good behaviour while we went through a very interesting debate about the need to change Canon 38 which appears to make it difficult for suicide victims to be buried in accordance with Church of England rites. Although there are ways round it, it was agreed that the right thing to do would be to amend it for the avoidance of doubt.

After lunch, we were introduced to some "accessible" baptismal texts by a lively Bishop of Truro - chaired by the indomitable GH. This sort of debate shows the tension between the purists and the pragmatic. Some don't appreciate the "modernising" of language and others reflect that our ways of "speaking historically" aren't understood by our users of casual office.

We finished our debates with a vitally important airing of issues associated with mission and growth in rural parishes. The context may well have been rural but so much of what was presented resonated with the debates that we had had the day before and the need to work positively to deal with the poor provision of true collaborative ministry and a better understanding of where lay ministry can help.

There is increasing talk amongst members of the need for good quality information to be given to potential candidates and to the electorate in time for the elections in the autumn. It is clear to me that the Church of England needs to take forward the reforms outlined above and show that it can make a difference to society as a whole through attending to the common good. This will only happen if we genuinely get a grip on what it means to be a disciple. The elections will need to produce candidates who can prove their willingness and ability to progress these issues.

However, I am sure that some will think of other issues to help to distract us from this!!

Tim Hind

Bath & Wells