

General Synod, Westminster, 20th - 23rd February 2018

For an overview of the Group of Sessions: [Agenda Papers](#)

Wednesday 20th

From time to time we try to deal with perceived problems in the way in which we do synod. Sometimes it is the way we conduct debates. Sometimes the way in which dates for synod are organised. These two things were both featured in this synod and the very fact that we were, for the first time, meeting on a Saturday helped to give a frisson to the debates to come. The reason for meeting on a Saturday had arisen from the perception that by not doing so we were preventing people who are still in full time employment from joining in. We are now only just over a year from the end of the synod's quinquennium and so this was - first - an experiment and - second - a test of whether it would work in future quinquennia.

As always, after introductions and welcomes, the first debate is on the agenda and this was despatched without too much issue. However, the next debate was to decide on the pattern of meetings going forward to 2023.

In this debate the Business Committee attempted to cement the inclusion of Saturdays in the February Westminster Synods. In the end a pragmatic, flexible solution was preferred. The issues are complex. Allowing for working people to engage means avoiding half-terms. Allowing teachers to be involved means including half-terms. Squaring circles ...

We always have a variety of external speakers - typically from the Anglican Communion. On this occasion we had two. Prem Chand Singh, Moderator of the Church of North India and Bishop of Jabalpur and Paul Korir, Bishop of Kapsabet in Kenya. My only criticism of their speeches was that Church House technology let them down. The lip synch distortion meant that, particularly for Prem Singh, his accent prevented members of synod from getting the best out of his speech. In Prem Singh's speech he described how there is a Guru to Shishaya relationship which we would describe as Christ to Disciple. He then went on to say that Discipleship is the Lifestyle of the followers of Jesus while Evangelism is their Mission imperative.

In Bishop Paul's address we were able more clearly to hear what he had to say and in principle were encouraged by the fact that they felt indebted to the first missionaries who went to Kenya but recognised the need to refocus on growing new Christians through evangelism and discipleship.

The Archbishop of Canterbury gave the Presidential address in which he continued the theme of evangelism and mission. He exhorted us to listen with a view to hearing rather than speaking. He hinted at the need for transformative activity with reference to 1 Peter which was going to be the subject of a Bible Study later in the session. In that later session we were confronted with the context of the passage where Peter was speaking into the situation of the diaspora of Jews in exile and describing the need for faithfulness to key aspects of their faith while still remaining members of the communities to which they now belonged. In this sense it was important to realise that being holy meant being faithful without being separated from the community to which one now belonged.

Later on in debates the Archbishop reiterated the point when he said that it was crucial for Christians to "know where they were - and stand there".

After a number of appointments were ratified, including young people being appointed ex-officio to the Archbishops Council, Questions gave the opportunity for the great and the good to be held to account.

A large number of contentious questions were raised on the subject of the way in which proposals are being made to use existing liturgy to welcome people who have transitioned their gender and now want to have their new lifestyle recognised. Mostly the blast came from those who are, seemingly, opposed to the way the church is moving on the recognition of the LGBTI community. The answer that was given to almost every one of these questions was that this was creatively using existing liturgy and not introducing new liturgy. The point here is that the latter would be a potential to subtly change the polity of the church and would therefore need greater scrutiny.

Thursday 21st

Thursday was going to be dominated by Legislative Business which would hopefully be followed by a Private Members Motion (PMM) on Homelessness and a Presentation on the work of the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) & Pastoral Advisory Group (PAG) Teams.

Many a Canon was promulgated, finally approved, revised or considered for the first time. The major bone of contention was in the final approval stage of the Draft Church Representation and Ministers Measure.

When a Measure goes through the legislative process it can be amended except at the Final Approval Stage. The reason for this is that it is to be hoped that most of the glitches will have been ironed out. In the instances this was

thought to have been the case as this particular bone had been reviewed in July last year. It related to a proposal that Parochial Lay Representatives on Deanery Synod would not be allowed to serve for more than two consecutive terms of office. The purpose of the amendment was to encourage more people to be engaged. There was a get out clause that would mean a PCC could opt out of the provision. For some of us it was felt that, particularly in rural parishes, where it is sometimes difficult enough to get 2 churchwardens let alone enthusiastic deanery synod representatives, that this additional barrier was not warranted.

After a very long and robust debate it was noted that the legislation would not kick in until 2026 and that there were several ways in which it could be altered before then. The only way forward, which would prevent the loss of other good things in the measure, was to pass the legislation as it stood, refer the "offending" clause to the Electoral Review Group (ERG) and ask the Presidents (the two Archbishops) to consider, when setting dates for implementation of the measure, delaying the implementation for that aspect.

Other legislative business was less contentious and included the introduction of regulation of religious communities which had been necessary to ensure that safeguarding was on a firm footing. (This had been subject to a Code of Conduct in the past but had been thrown into high relief by the Peter Ball Case).

The PMM (GS2110A & GS2110B) was well presented. It called on the Archbishops' Council to enable a Homelessness Taskforce to be created which would undertake the formation of plans at every level of the church to provide shelter and support for those who were vulnerable. It was passed overwhelmingly.

The presentation on LLF & PAG were very well received by the majority of Synod.

The process started after the failure of the debate in February 2017 to accept the way forward being proposed (it fell in the House of Clergy). That proposal had been to create a new "teaching" document regarding issues of human sexuality without first understanding what might have changed since the current document was put in place. What is emerging is a new "learning" document together with a mechanism to deal with pastoral issues as they arise on a case by case basis. More information can be found [here](#). Some particularly useful material about pastoral principles is on the Pastoral Advisory Group [webpage](#).

Friday 22nd

Today was a day for the environment, evangelism and farewells (and Standing Orders! Always a joy!).

We finished off the adjourned debate on Environmental Programmes from the July 2018 Synod. The adjournment had provided time for some things to happen which would not otherwise be in place and as a result meant that the motion would be successful. The report (GS Misc 1212) explained that in its report in October 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued the most urgent and far-reaching call yet for world governments to cut their greenhouse gas emissions. Usefully, there has been an investigation centrally into the feasibility of developing a tool for measuring the carbon emissions from cathedrals, churches and church halls, which will be straightforward for parishes and churches to use. It appears that this can be achieved without setting up a new system. This had been one of the sticking points which had led to the adjournment.

The first of five debates on evangelism welcomed the report of the Evangelism Task Group which encourages all levels of the church to plan for evangelism as a priority next year and always. It calls for increased effort to equip lay and ordained people to be more confident in living and telling the story.

With a small interval where we refused some and accepted others of the suggestions from the Standing Orders Committee we headed for our second evangelism debate. Of note amongst the casualties on Standing Orders was the rejection of an attempt to remove the secret ballot aspect of the Crown Nominations Commission. The most positive of the changes was to allow representatives of the Anglican Communion that had been invited to join us would be allowed to speak in Synod, by prior arrangement.

Our second evangelism debate was focused on young children and we started with standing up and being invited to sit down depending on the decade of our lives in which we came to faith. Starting with the over sixties and working down the scale, the vast majority of members came to faith before they reach 20. This showed two things. First, that General Synod had at last found something where it was representative of its electorate. Second, that Synod was right to consider positive steps to weave the House of Bishops' vision in their report (GS 2121) through every layer of church activity.

Farewells were said to the Bishops of Dover and Norwich. In former times, when Synod was less technologically wired, farewells were often humorous but

purely oral. The highlight of these farewells included slideshows of the bishops as they went around their dioceses and in the case of the Bishop of Norwich a video of him (in the interest of science) walking on custard.

Our final debate on evangelism targeted the work required to reinvigorate the presence of church on estates. This was the first of three evangelism debates to deal with marginalised groups. The Bishop Burnley urged us to vote against his motion if we felt that we couldn't cope with the consequences of passing it. It was a good debate and teased out the difficulties of providing ministry to communities in historic and new social housing estates.

Saturday 23rd

After an early Open Synod Group Committee meeting where we said goodbye to our President, Trevor, Bishop of Dover, who had served us faithfully over many years I headed into my first Westminster Saturday Synod Day.

My observation is that Synod was a little thin. This was sad as those who weren't present missed the uplifting worship led by the Community of Anselm.

We had two more debates which focused Synod on the need for evangelism amongst communities that have been overlooked.

First, we were presented with the harrowing stories about the way in which Gypsy, Roma and Travellers suffer discrimination. We heard of how some churches are doing great work reaching out to these communities but in some instances suffering abuse as a result. We also heard how important is to have Chaplains "with" rather than "to" such people.

Secondly we had the somewhat enthusiastic Canon Mark Russell (the nearest thing the CofE gets to a Duracell bunny!) presenting the need to invest in youth work as a vital tool for mission. Lots of good points were made but the one thing that stuck in my mind was the need to ensure young people are engaged at every level of church governance.

Our third debate of the morning helped us to come to mind about the pervasiveness of betting adverts. The motion was not calling for a complete ban, but rather, to reduce them. An amendment to ask for a ban was resisted on the grounds that it would be unhelpful in terms of the behind the scenes activity currently taking place to implement change. The amendment failed to get sufficient support.

The afternoon had been set aside to have a State of Nation Debate to console those who had really wanted head home to watch the Six Nations Match between Wales and England.

Despite being guided by the Archbishop of Canterbury to the effect that this was not about Brexit, speaker after speaker commented that the divisions of our society were being exposed by the Brexit debates and processes.

The motion required our church to be there to pray for those in authority, to promote the voice of the marginalised and to work to the common good at this time of great division.

I felt that, although we had to spend some time on legislation, it was good that we spent so much of our time this group of sessions on social issues and evangelism.

The first few years of every quinquennium will normally have a variety of material to deal with. As the quinquennium winds to its conclusion there becomes a less fragmented set of things on our agenda as the desire to complete things presses us.

We have potentially only 3 more groups of sessions before a new Synod is elected. We can expect less social & common good and more legislation on our agenda. So, it has been really good to have had this wonderfully diverse Synod in which key work for Synod can be promoted.

It was great to have a group of people from Shepton Mallet Deanery come up to witness the activity on Saturday. I think that it would be good for other Deaneries to do the same on a more intentional basis so that their story of what happens here at Synod can be told from a fresh perspective.

I will not be present for the July Synod (my first absence since 1995) and look forward to reporting back again in February next year.

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