

# GENERAL SYNOD REPORT – JULY 2012

## Friday 8<sup>th</sup> July

As Synod gathers there is little on the agenda to excite the average person in the pew (the ecclesiastical equivalent of the man on the Clapham Bendibus). The one area that is getting most people slightly animated is Parochial Fees. It just goes to show the depth of the agenda!

Outside in the world the papers are full of the News of the World scandal re phone hacking. On the margins there is the issue of House of Lords Reform. On the international scene there is a sense of unease about the plight of Christians in Sudan. In the bars of the University synod members are talking about a number of issues including homosexuality, laity elections and many other things.

The highlight of the afternoon was the address from His Beatitude Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana, Durrës & All Albania who is the Orthodox President of the World Council of Churches. In it he described the devastation caused to the churches in Albania between 1967 & 1990 when there was a systematic removal of the Orthodox Church presence in Albania.

Through recognising that it was more important to be faithful to God than to seek Success (whatever that might mean) he was able to get through the period of reconstruction of the Albanian church by – as we might say – letting go and letting God.

During the debate on the Agenda there was a significant number of suggestions regarding the lack in the agenda of several burning topics as mentioned above.

However, generally speaking the event has been dull to mediocre so far. It should be noted that a large proportion of the Bath & Wells contingent have already been vocal.

Over supper the House of Laity were presented a number of suggestions regarding the way in which they can and should make an impact back in their Dioceses, Deaneries and Parishes. This included holding your MPs to account and tackling an area with which you are unfamiliar.

The evening was finished off with questions where the people who ask questions get a large number of broadly unsatisfactory answers.

## Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> July

I really enjoyed Saturday morning. It started off, for me, with a House of Laity Standing Committee which reflected on the Supper the night before.

We had a brilliant presidential address to set the scene for the group work (indaba?) sessions on Sharing Good News for the world today. Apparently, Sky turned up to record the address as they were convinced that Rowan would talk about News of The World. They were disappointed. In his address he spoke of the need to be able to walk with people as we walk with Jesus and the need to be a Church in Love. He

challenged us to ask the questions “what does it mean to each one of us that God does not abandon us?” and “where do we see our church doing that?”.

I had been assigned to Archbishop Sentamu’s group and thought we would be in for an interesting session. As it happened it became even more challenging by virtue of +Sentamu’s absence and +Rowan’s attendance (in his stead) as it ended up with me convening a session asking questions about what people could remember of +Rowan’s address. Needless to say one member of the group had total recall.

At lunchtime there was a significant number of fringe meetings before we began the long afternoon session on legislative business.

Most of this was tedious but it became lively when people started to discuss the level of parochial fees. It was very sad that members had not fully appreciated where we were in the cycle of development of the Fees Order. We had already passed the measure and it had achieved Royal Assent. So the structure and logistics were fairly well settled. What we were debating was the level of the fees.

Some people complained that the fees for “x” were too high and others that the fees for “y” were too low. Well, that was always going to happen when an inherently unaccountable system was subjected to a bit of rigour regarding the rationale for fees. What was more worrying was that members were still trying to argue against the structure that had been agreed and passed into law. As a result of the vote the old fees table now applies but the new provisions preventing additional charges has come into play reducing the income significantly in some cases.

The evening session was concerned with the creation of a National Mission Action Planning mechanism and was overwhelmingly accepted with a couple of tweaks.

After Synod sessions were done we had the Open Synod Group quiz which is always a good laugh and which allows members to let what little hair they have left down.

## **Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> July**

Sunday morning was very special. One of my new responsibilities as an officer of the Synod is to be a Communion Assistant in the Minster. I found that performing that function with so many of my synod colleagues coming to the rail was such a privilege and a blessing. After the service there was a reception at the Deanery in glorious sunshine – until the expected rain kicked in.

Over the weekend we had a number of visitors. I have already mentioned His Beatitude. In addition we had a couple of TEC (American Episcopal Church) members and I was able to renew friendship with Gregor Duncan, the Bishop of Glasgow & Galloway whom I had met in June at the Scottish Episcopal Synod.

The address in the Minster had been delivered by the Bishop of Copenhagen, Peter Skov-Jakobsen. In it he reminded us that barriers existed in Christian communities long before they discovered dogmatic ways of causing divisions. He also reminded us that we must not make faith into a ghetto opportunity or rely on a King Canute attitude towards the tide of change.

We also had Bishop Victoria Matthews from Christchurch, New Zealand who was able to talk very powerfully at the Open Synod Group about the difficulties they are suffering following the massive earthquakes this year. She explained how, for her, the issue of the consecration for women seems very “old hat” - she has been in post 17 years – and that she just believes in it and lives it.

In the afternoon we discussed the issues surrounding the impact on ordinand training of the changes to Higher Education Funding nationally

This was followed by a debate on an interim report on progress being made on our walk with the Methodists.

Synod agenda is not always driven from the Boards and Councils. A diocesan synod motion from Bradford was debated regarding the possibility that adults could be admitted to communion even though they were not wanting to be confirmed. After a series of speeches in favour and against there were a couple of speeches that seriously questioned the effect of passing the motion. It was felt that it wasn't reflective of the way in which adult initiation should take place – nor would it change practice on the ground. Adjournment of the debate was proposed and we moved to next business.

In the evening we had a brief debate on the Audit Report and a dynamic presentation on the previous year's activity of the Archbishops' Council.

## **Monday 11<sup>th</sup> July**

There is a song which starts “There could be trouble ahead”.

The first item on the agenda for today was the re-presentation of the appointment to the role of Chair of Business Committee of the Bishop of Dover. The appointment had not been made in February and when the Archbishops' Council met afterwards they decided that it would not be unreasonable to keep the nomination for a time-limited period subject to a review which would be concluded at a time prior to the end of the time limit.

It became clear that a number of Synod members were still unhappy and +Dover graciously withdrew his name from the system and so the motion was not debated. This means that the process will continue with the Archbishops' Council identifying within the current rules an appropriate candidate. It appears that the majority of the argument is that it would be inappropriate for a member of the House of Bishops to be in such a position – even though the rules do not, as currently constituted, prohibit it.

It doesn't matter how the opponents dress it up as being a principle it doesn't stop the fact that there has been significant hurt felt by many of the players in this activity and hence pastoral healing will be needed.

In July last year a motion to tidy up some of the “qualifying connection” anomalies for the Marriage Act was proposed and these came forward and were passed. We gave initial consideration to some Eucharistic Prayers for use when there are a substantial number of young people present. They will now go into revision.

An issue that pops up regularly is the way in which the House of Laity are elected. Many think that it is unrepresentative. The next debate was an attempt to get a review of the logistics for election. Despite the fact that there is already a review planned synod passed this but the voting was interesting. Amongst the clergy (including the Bishops) the vote was 105 – 27 (80% - 20%) in favour of the review. In the House of Laity the vote was a lot closer (92 – 66) at a majority of only 58% to 42%.

After lunch and running up to the close we had a series of fairly important social and church relationship debates interspersed with the budget approvals.

Either side of the budget debate, which was well presented by Andrew Britton, we had a debate on the progress being made to improve representation of Minority Ethnic people within the church structures and a debate on the way in which the church engages with Minority Ethnic Communities – focusing particularly on the centres set up through the Near Neighbours project.

In the final slot of the day we had a debate on relationships with the United Reformed Church – vitally important as we approach the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the date on which the puritans were evicted in the Great Ejection for failure to sign up to the 39 articles amongst other things as the church tried to regain lost ground following the reestablishment of the Monarchy – post Cromwell. We don't hang about you know.

## **Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> July**

We started Tuesday with a presentation on a new initiative that Archbishops Rowan Williams and Vincent Nichol (RC) are beginning on supporting Christians in the Holy Land.

A relatively low key presentation of the activities of the Church Commissioners was delivered by Andreas Whittam Smith. Abetted by Timothy Walker they answered questions. There were several good news stories in the mix but there was also a stark warning that the European debt crisis was still active and might suffer further due to the difficulties announced regarding the Italian economy.

The calm tones of the First Church Estates Commissioner attempted to play down the involvement of the Church in News International shareholding arising from the BskyB exposure (rather than the newspaper side of things). It didn't placate all members.

Next we had a debate on the way in which changes to the national education system impacts the provision by the Church of England and in particular the growth of Academies. A report showing a number of things to be done to optimise our response was debated and enhanced by an amendment wishing to highlight FE issues. The debate saw Sue Rose cut her Synodical teeth with her maiden speech. We also had Mark Russell's valedictory swansong. We will miss his fire and passion immensely.

Archbishop Sentamu was able to join us for this last session of Synod and was able to have the York Province Deputy Prolocutors presented to him. It was good to see him but we all pray that he tries to curb his enthusiasm to resume his workaholism.

**Tim Hind**

Bath & Wells