

General Synod, Westminster, 6th - 10th July 2018

Friday 6th

This was destined to be a bizarre Synod. Not only did we have a changed format to allow for a less confrontational way of exploring some ideas regarding the abiding issue of the day, viz human sexuality, but also we found that a culturally unexpected arrival by the national football team in the Quarter Finals of the FIFA World Cup had meant that Synod coincided with the match.

Synod started quietly with introductions of representatives from around the Anglican Communion and Ecumenically connected churches. We had some addresses from some of them of which the most disturbing was that from Archbishop Humphrey Peters from Pakistan who spoke of the danger from persecution within the Christian community there. The other address today was from the Archbishop Albert Chama from the Province of Central Africa. He spoke of the changes that are taking place in his part of the world.

In his presidential address to Synod, Archbishop Sentamu spoke of the things that prevent us from being effective evangelists to the nation. He characterised it in terms of our inability to hope, amongst other things.

For example he asked the question 'What does hope look like for gay, heterosexual, lesbian and transgender people?' and gave the answer, 'Freedom from bigotry and hatred; an environment in which we all can flourish'. In all the examples he gave he suggested that God was nudging us to hope.

The Agenda Debate and Questions took the usual pattern of spleen venting where people raised awkward questions about their own agendas. A particular annoyance for some was the suppression of some Private Members Motions relating to Sexuality while the so-called Teaching Document was being developed. The hierarchy were accused of kicking cans down the road. There were also some attempts by some members to talk up the recent GAFCON meeting in Jerusalem. The promotion of this group by a small minority is not always well received by the Synod.

Saturday, 7th

The whole day was being given over to Safeguarding, Seminars and Workshops with accommodation being made to ensure there was space for the Sweden v England Quarter Final.

Sheila Fish (Scie) & Jo Kind (MACSAS) started us off with a presentation where the voice of victims and survivors of abuse was able to be heard. The message that came out of this - some from survey and some anecdotal - was that our church needs to change its culture and reorient itself in its attitude towards them. It was also important, given the courage of the survivors in naming their abuse, that we needed to borrow that courage in demanding a new radical change in our church.

Bishop Peter Hancock, lead bishop on safeguarding then took us through a progress and next steps proposal that helped us to focus on the emerging themes for safeguarding. These were

- Support for, and engagement with, victims and survivors of abuse
- Clergy Selection, Suitability & Discipline, and
- Structure, independence, oversight and enforcement.

An additional parish-focussed priority was added to the list together with a call to develop improved relationships between survivors and the church.

The afternoon was an interesting mix of opportunities. Most of the offered activities focussed on the work being undertaken following the failure to take note of the House of Bishops' report (GS 2055) in February 2017. The work here is split between what have been called the Pastoral Review and Bishops' Teaching. The latter has been criticised for possibly being a waste of time while the underlying principles relating to the current guidelines have not been changed. Why revise the training when nothing has changed!

However, I was encouraged by the way that the thinking on the Bishops' Teaching has moved much more towards the creation of resources to educate on issues relating to Identity, Sexuality and Marriage. This might just defuse some of that criticism. Other seminars included insights into digital evangelism amongst other things.

The Synod organisers arrange for a continuing praying presence throughout the group of sessions. Synod members responded to this by creating their own continuing praying presence in the afternoon to support the England team in its game against Sweden.

Sunday 8th

Sunday morning sees Synod invading the Minster to join that congregation for our Eucharist. This year I had the privilege of leading Intercessions at that service. Once again dodgy acoustics within the Minster prevented the Sermon given by Archbishop Sentamu to be appreciated fully. However, once again the highlight of the service was the choir singing Psalm 150 as the service concluded.

The afternoon contained three debates on ethical issues. Following a useful presentation on issues relating to climate change, the first two debates were in turn about the need to maintain engagement with companies engaged in fossil fuels and about the need to be able to monitor reductions in Carbon Dioxide emissions, amongst other things.

In the first of these the motion sought approval to begin disinvestment in 2020 should companies drag their feet. A more purist approach which looked for a more immediate disinvestment. It was argued that this would remove our influence and allow companies off the hook. The amendment failed.

In the second motion we were invited to reflect on the importance of being able to monitor emissions and ensure that promised targets are met. Due a perceived lack of information there was a request to postpone the full debate until February 2019. Sadly, because of the way the adjournment was done, no one has been formally charged with filling the data deficit.

The final debate for the day was on the ethics of nuclear weapons. Prompted by a new treaty, which is gaining ascendancy, relating to the banning of nuclear weapons, this debate seeks to put our church firmly behind this move. An attempt to put us onto a more aggressively pacifist stance was rejected.

Monday 9th

After the usual presentation on the work of the Archbishops' Council and the usual charismatic speech on the Archbishops' Council Budget submission we spent long hours on legislative business. Some was merely wrapping up the final stages of legislation that had been previously scrutinised thoroughly. Some was to go through in minute detail bits of text for the avoidance of unexpected consequences.

As a result of these new measures we have simplified our legislation and reduced the burden of such legislation on parishes.

As a result of the time taken on the legislation we had a squeezed debate on supporting the NHS. The debate was good but we could have had a more submissions had we had a more reasonable time set aside.

The highlight of the day was an address by Archbishop Moon Hing from South East Asia. He enthusiastically embraced the need for intentional evangelism. As an illustration of how evangelism can be ineffective he said that if you grow Mango trees and eat all the fruit you end up with no Mango trees after a while. However, if you plant all the seeds you will get more Mango trees and so your forest (jungle?) will expand.

Tuesday 10th

We started the day with a presentation on the work of the Church Commissioners. It was good to note that, for the first time ever, all the Church Estates Commissioners are all female. The message was that the funds were being well managed and suitably diverse in their makeup to ensure that we will be well placed for any eventuality.

The meat of Tuesday morning was a presentation by the Bishop of Bristol (formerly Dean York) on the report of the Cathedrals Working Group. This report introduces changes to the governance arrangements for Cathedrals. This would streamline the arrangements by the removal of the Council and the creation of a Senior Executive Team. Further, the Chapter would be reconstituted to include a Vice-Chair appointed by the Bishop and would have a majority of Non-Executive members.

A functional but necessary morning ended with changes to Standing Orders and farewells.

Overall this extended weekend was generally more relaxed than many Synods and much less tense than I expected.

Heading home from York, I felt encouraged and looked forward to modelling some of the General Synod practices in my Diocese. I knew that I would not have to wait long as the next day we were to have our Diocesan Synod with space to allow members to watch the FIFA World Cup Semi-Final!

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