

General Synod Group of Sessions February 2019

On **Wednesday 20th** there was a preliminary meeting for the House of Laity, before the main sessions started, to discuss the papers on Clergy Wellbeing – about which the laity were very much in favour.

The first item on the Agenda is always the report by the Business Committee, outlining their reasoning for the shape of the agenda, and the business allowed. This was prolonged by a slightly fractious debate about the timings for the sessions in 2021, 22 and 23. They have been experimenting with having the London sessions partly over a weekend as we do in York, to alleviate the time working folk have to take off work, which for some has to come out of their annual leave. I thought the clergy might well prefer not to use a Saturday because of having to get home (Synod ends at 4.00pm on the Saturday) and take their usual services on Sunday. This did not seem to be the problem, however; it was more to do with any member having to lose a second weekend with their families. The mood of Synod seemed to be that it was not worth spending a lot of time on!

There were two guests from the wider Anglican Communion: the Most Revd Prem Chand Singh from north India, Bishop of Jabalpur, and the Rt Revd Paul Korir from Kenya. They were most welcome, though the Indian was quite difficult to understand. To the surprise of most people the Kenyan bishop spoke most warmly and enthusiastically about how grateful he and his people were for the Anglican missionaries who had taken the Christian faith to his country. This came as a surprise to me (and I think a lot of others too!) I am more used to hear of the oppression of the white man and the corruption of slavery and exploitation of resources than thanks. But he was very clear what a debt was owed for this gift, and he received warm applause and a standing ovation at the end. There will be a change in future proceedings – guests from the wider Anglican Communion will be allowed to speak in debates, though not vote.

Next the Archbishop of Canterbury gave his presidential address. He spoke about the Lambeth Conference 2020, where the text for their time together will be 1 Peter. He spoke of the unhelpfulness of rumour and gossip: we should speak love fluently, he said: if we believe in love, hope and holiness then we must look like what we speak about. He reminded us of how tied up we can get in conspiracy and ‘fake news’ quoting Count Metternich, who when he heard of the death of Tallyrand said ‘Now what does he mean by that?’

The final piece of business was 120 Questions which had been sent in by members. We receive an email before Synod, and a paper copy in the hall. All now have a written answer by a designated person, but supplementary questions can be asked – they do have to be questions and not a speech venting a personal point of view. A large number were on matters of gender and the possible ways in which trans people may be sensitively welcomed by the Church. You can I think find all this on the CofE website – I won’t attempt to replicate it here.

Thursday 21st February.

Members from Ely had been asked to serve at the morning Holy Communion, and all was well until we were clearing up afterwards. The surplus wafers were reserved, but the wine had to be consumed. I am not very large, and do not commonly drink the equivalent of a large tumbler of fortified wine at 9.30am! I kept passing it to Nick Moir, but I had to have a strong coffee before I could attend the first debate without gently nodding off in my chair.

The first item was the legislative business, much of which I suggest you gather from the website. However there was an item in the Church representation revision which had caused a lot of anxiety. Most of the simplification has been gratefully welcomed, but many of us were concerned at the new ruling that no member of a Deanery Synod could serve for more than two three year terms. This would eliminate huge numbers of faithfully serving members – to no good purpose that most of us could see. It was an ‘unintended consequence’ we were told, and the Chair of that Committee, the Ven Jane Steen, Archdeacon of Southwark, assured us that if we voted for the bill she would undertake to ensure that that particular sentence was removed. With that assurance we voted for the Elections Review Group’s work. Other matters included amendments to allow electronic voting for GS and Diocesan Synods; joint councils for multi-parish benefices, with one benefice service on a Sunday; (not quite the headline ‘Church of England scraps Sunday

services' but that's the media for you); lay majorities on PCCs, and ordinations to Bishop's Mission initiatives were also carried. The changes to the fees will come to all your churches so I won't go over them now.

A new Code of Practice was accepted and welcomed to allow participation in services by members of other denominations.

We were running out of time at this point, and timed business was looming, which would have meant that a debate on Homelessness would have been postponed again – it was first planned for 2017. Bishop Stephen asked that we could change the timings so that this important debate could be heard, and the members supported this fully.

This was a private member's motion, from Andrew Gray who spoke most eloquently in support of linking to existing charities and local initiatives to ease the problems caused by homelessness. Crisis believes there are 236,000 homeless people in the UK currently. Bishop Stephen was called to speak, and said 'I live with an elderly cat' (blank faces all round the chamber) 'and if anything happens to me she is far more likely to find another home than any of the thousands of people sleeping on the streets of London tonight. Children, cancer and animals are the best supported charities in this country. Homelessness is a very long way down the list.' This comparison made quite an impact. The motion was supported overwhelmingly.

The next item was on 'Living in Love and Faith' and the Pastoral Group made a presentation identifying 6 underlying problems: ignorance, silence, fear, hypocrisy, misused power, and prejudice, surrounding attitudes to LBGTQI+ people. Bishop Christine Hardman called for increased awareness and understanding. Bishop Christopher Cocksworth, the lead bishop, then outlined the document's progress, (called LLF for short.) Dr Eeva John spoke about the resources being produced. Questions were allowed, but as it was not a debate there was no vote. Speakers were concerned about 'irreconcilable positions', and conversion therapy was highlighted as wrong. Many of the points had been raised in the Questions session. It will remain a difficult subject for some time.

Friday 22nd February

We began with a debate on Environmental Programmes, which had been postponed from York. Two dioceses, London and Truro introduced these plans to reduce the Church's carbon footprint in 2016, but it had not been debated until now. It aimed specifically to recognise climate change, reduce energy consumption and promote best practice. John Spence announced that £10,000 is to be tagged for consultancy, and £10,000 for parish return forms to be amended to capture energy readings, and one part-time or full time post to be considered to move this forward. The First Estates Commissioner, Lorretta Minghella, reminded us that we had asked for disinvestment and robust conversations with companies, which had resulted in Shell, BP and Exxon revising their positions. Despite one sceptic this was passed overwhelmingly.

Evangelism and Discipleship came next, and a wide ranging debate covered lay witness, telling stories, 'Setting God's People Free', apologetics, motivation, open conversations, e-learning and social media, training ordinands, an inclusive and invitational call, and expanding Thy Kingdom Come (we all held up banners), which is now interdenominational. It was revealed that there was no training in British Sign Language, and there are 17 dioceses with no deaf chaplain.

Proposed changes to the Crown Nominations Commission. Bishop Michael Lichfield led this group. Proposals were made to remove secret voting and have more open discussion, but these failed, due to voting by the laity. It was voted by Houses: Bishops 19 for – 14 against; Clergy 76 for, 6 against, 4 abstentions; Laity 63 for, 99 against, 5 abstentions. However in future it will be sufficient to have a two thirds majority in voting in the CNC.

Next came Growing Faith: Ministry Amongst Children and Young People. Bishop Stephen Ely led on this, and asked us all to stand if we were able. He then counted down from people in their 70s to sit down as he reached the age at which they had come to faith. Not really to anyone's surprise the vast majority were left standing until he reached teens and childhood. (Owing to a small numerical error there was one person left

standing! +S had somehow missed out 12.) This really made the whole point: parents have the most influence, and other key adults such as grandparents, and we must do more in our schools and youth gatherings. Key findings in research are that young people want to be part of the whole church family, and included; they want to be equal members; youth leaders help bridge the gap; and the young need space to explore faith. Children are most often lost at the transition to secondary school. All clergy need training in young people's work – it is apparently optional in training institutions. 'Understanding Christianity' was promoted as a resource – and has been very successful across Ely Diocese, with many non church schools taking it up. We need young ambassadors and intergenerational churches. A BBC sitcom writer spoke about podcasts, and others wanted downloadable materials and apps. Carried overwhelmingly.

Farewells.

Bishop Trevor Willmot, the Bishop of Dover was particularly thanked for his work with refugees across the channel, and also with the Channel Islands; and for his hospitality and hard work. He has to cover when ++Justin is not in the diocese of Canterbury.

And Graham Norwich, who is the longest serving Bishop, especially thanked for his savvy with the media. ++Justin said with great admiration, that he was the 'go to' bishop when there was anything over-exciting the media – because he could make anything sound routine - if not boring when he tried. A great skill, said Justin, and one for which he was very grateful.

We also said goodbye to Stephen Slack who had piloted the legal work on women in ministry, equalities etc. Jonathan Spencer was warmly thanked for his time as Chairman of the Pensions Board, with especial thanks for staying on after the sudden death of the CEO last year.

Estates Evangelism. Bishop Philip North spoke energetically on the need to have a church presence on every estate with social housing units, reaching the poor and working class. The Bishop of London highlighted the need for money for training and education. The motion was carried, urging dioceses to develop Strategic Development bids, and for the Renewal and Reform Group to be concerned for Christians in every community.

Saturday 23rd February

We began with a bible study on 1 Peter 1 vv 1 – 21, which was lead by ++Justin's chaplain, who gave an absorbing background and theological over view of the passage.

The first debate was on Centuries of Marginalisation: Mission and Ministry among Gypsy, Roma and Travelling Communities. A speech was made by a member of the Gypsy community, Janie Codona, giving examples of the ways in which she and her family and friends had been treated. A background paper gave some startling facts: 90% of children suffered racial abuse; 2/3 have been attacked; life expectancy is 12 years below the average for women, and 10 for men; infant mortality is 3 times higher, as is depression. 5% of the prisoners are from this group. These communities are often refused occasional church offices, and supplies of water from churchyard taps. They cannot easily register with schools or doctors. We were reminded that 2879 Gypsies died at Auschwitz, and 500,000 altogether in the Holocaust. We were called on to speak out about racism, stop media victimisation, instigate a Commission to make land available, including church land, urge the Government to address their legal position if they have arrived recently, and for each diocese to appoint a chaplain – there are currently only two in the country. I found this very difficult: the abuse and discrimination appalled me, but there was no mention made of the way in which some sections of this community behave in settled areas. No doubt some of this is retaliation for the ways we have treated them, but I thought it was too one sided as a presentation. In any case the motion was passed 265 in favour, 1 against and no abstentions.

Mark Russell, Head of the Church Army, gave a typically energetic and enthusiastic speech affirming youth officers, and encouraging dioceses to invest in youth ministry. 95% of our churches have fewer than 25 young people in them. Comments were made that the lack of welcome to LGBTQI+ young people was off-putting for many young people. Young people in Synod emphasised the need for more focus on the young who need including in Deanery MAPs. This was passed overwhelmingly.

Advertising and Gambling. This motion asked the Government to reduce gambling advertising, and encourage churches to help those addicted, and educate children. There were some sad stories from those in the chamber who had themselves been addicted, and the devastating effects it had had on their lives. It is suggested that this is a 'victimless' crime, but not to the families caught up in the results. It was revealed that 55,000 school children are addicted. A young member from Southwark spoke about the defrauding of one church community of £1 million in on-line gambling. After the success of the betting on fixed odds motion from Synod we hope that this will be equally effective in drawing attention to this scandal. The motion was passed unanimously.

The State of the Nation – a debate tabled by the Archbishops. ++Justin began this debate by underlining the advantages we have, living in the UK. We have relative stability, influence and democracy. He called for prayer for those in Government leadership, and highlighted the Brexit anxieties, particularly for the poor. The Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, echoed these concerns, and the anxieties in Europe also. Others mentioned council and Govt cuts, divisive politics, job losses and the rise in populism rather than the public good. The motion noted the divisions felt, called on us all to pray, reaffirmed Christian commitment to the poor and marginalised, and called on all leaders to work together for the whole of society.

++Justin then asked all of us to sit as he had a lengthy announcement to make. What could this be at this stage in the Synod? 'I prorogue these sessions' he said with a grin. I think he still finds synodical language a bit much!

This comes with the usual health warning: this is General Synod according to Janet.

Janet Perrett
6.3.2019