

General Synod Report, on the July 2017 Group of Sessions

There is always a point during General Synod when the chamber erupts into sustained laughter. This is usually the fault of the Archbishop of Canterbury. He did it again! This time delivering a farewell speech for the Bishop of Lambeth, Nigel Stock, known previously to many of us as the Bishop of Stockport. The Archbishop, it transpired, was seriously peeved not to have been able to track down anyone from Bishop Nigel's many years of ministry who had anything remotely resembling a negative word to say about him. Bishop Nigel is shortly to retire and will be much missed. An equally heartfelt, although less hilarious, farewell was also made to the Bishop of Bristol.

This came at the end of a really varied few days which had begun with welcoming several ecumenical guests including, in the 500th year since the Reformation, Bishop Matti Repo of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Reports were given by the Business Committee, the Archbishop's Council and the Church Commissioners. These and all other items on the July agenda can be found on the Church of England website for those interested in the detail.

The Archbishop's Council reported that their main objectives over the next three years were to encourage and develop evangelism, discipleship and ministry. In short, to make the name of Jesus known in this nation. We were cautioned that, as achievable as these are, they are only achievable if we all play our part. The aim is to see spiritual as well as numerical growth and to place an emphasis on prayer and worship.

Archbishop Sentamu introduced his paper, "After the General Election, A Still Small Voice." In it he outlined the need to recognise the value of all in society; commitment to offer everyone the opportunity to flourish; appreciation of our essential inter-relatedness and acceptance of our responsibility towards ourselves and others. During the debate which followed, the Archbishop asked for a show of hands by those who would willingly top up the amount of tax they pay out of their take-home pay in order to benefit society as a whole. Almost everyone indicated that they would be willing to do this. It was suggested that this be moved in a formal motion to Parliament, but there was not time to do the work necessary at this group of sessions so the idea was rejected.

For those awake enough early enough, each day begins with Holy Communion. On Saturday morning this was led by Bishop Libby. The business of the day began with a presentation from the House of Bishops, following on from the February sessions, on Next Steps in Human Sexuality. A teaching document will follow in due course, "to reflect a radical new Christian inclusion, founded in scripture, in reason and in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the church of England has received it.' It was pointed out that it will take time to work on this and that Synod should not expect such a document before 2020. The Bishops are aware of the urgency for such a document but also of the need to be thorough and that pastoral action cannot be divorced from theology. It will work on three assumptions:

1. Every person is created in God's image and Jesus died for them.
2. Everyone involved in the debate is concerned with faithfulness to a God of love, mercy, truth and justice.
3. All will work towards a lack of fear of each other.

An introductory paper on National Support for Local Churches led to a series of workshops during the afternoon. These included Thy Kingdom Come, Digital Evangelism, Inclusion and Outreach to the Marginalised, and National Events as an opportunity for community witness. We were made aware of a wide variety of resources for local churches on the following websites:

www.thykingdomcome.global/
www.Churchsupporthub.org
WWW.churchprinthub.org
www.pastoralservicesdiary.org

The afternoon brought us to the first of the Private Members' Motions calling on Synod to condemn the use of conversion therapy. After a full and very well conducted debate, the Motion was passed, with one amendment, by large majorities in all three Houses.

Sunday began with worship in York Minster - always a joy to worship in such an inspiring and beautiful building. After lunch we debated an item brought by Blackburn Diocese that liturgical material be prepared for the welcoming and affirmation of transgender members of the church. This was also passed with large majorities in all three Houses.

A report on Clergy Wellbeing followed. We were reminded both of the words of the ordinal, "You cannot bear the weight of this (ministry) in your own strength," and that we have a shared responsibility to make Christ known.

Archbishop Justin noted that, "To be human is to be limited," and said we all had much to learn from disabled clergy. We were asked to commit to pray for our clergy, Bishops and Archbishops daily as a whole church. Clergy can be notoriously bad at ring-fencing their holidays and day off. We are asked to encourage them to safeguard these times. A Clergy Wellbeing Covenant will come to Synod for approval in the next two to three years.

The next Private Members' Motion was regarding the Schools Admissions Code. It was to ask the Secretary of State to put into place certain provisions for anyone - clergy, armed forces, etc. - whose job requires them to live in tied accommodation so that they do not find themselves unable to find places for their children in the local school. The debate included strong arguments for and against but in the end the motion was carried.

The final day began, after worship, with a debate around the cost of applying for citizenship, brought by Birmingham Diocesan Synod. Many of us were shocked to find out just how costly it currently is to apply, especially when compared to the actual running costs and those fees charged by our European neighbours. The request for the Archbishop's Council to investigate and make recommendations to the Government, and for the Lords Spiritual to seek opportunities to raise the matter in the House of Lords was met with overwhelming support. We also agreed to urge our parishes to raise the issue with the local MP.

Synod took note of a Report from the Business Committee with regard to voting for members of the House of Laity in future elections of people to General Synod. After a presentation of the various options open to us we were asked to vote for our preferred method. The Business Committee will look at what Synod has said and report back in plenty of time for the elections for the next quinquennium in 2020.

The last two pieces of business before the Archbishop's Council's budget was laid out were items which had been debated at some length the previous July, namely, the amending of Canon law with regard to clergy vestments and to the burial of suicides. Both measures were carried with very little opposition. In the case of vestments, clergy are to be able to dress to best "benefit the mission of the Church in the parish," in consultation with their PCC. In the case of the burial of suicides it was agreed that they should be allowed Christian burial rites previously denied them. It was pointed out that it was the family left behind after such a tragedy for whom the funeral service and pastoral care are particularly important. The amendments to the Canon having been agreed, letters from Synod will now be sent to the Queen to ask her to execute these changes and put them into Canon Law.

The last thing to mention is the work which has been done since "Setting God's People Free" was presented in February. An advisory group has been established with a mix of clergy and laity and including young people. A Director is being appointed to oversee their work. A summary of their report should be out in August. A '7 Steps' rule of life will be available in October which, it is hoped, will be an encouragement to all in prayer and discipleship.

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