

General Synod, Westminster, 8th - 10th February 2018

Thursday 8th

Many of you will know that there are times when particular phrases or themes emerge which categorise a Synod. There are many words that emerged during this group of sessions. However, the one word that emerged for me was "relationship". Relationship to our world, to other Christians and with vulnerable people.

There were also many times when innovation was evident. For a start this was the first time ever that a Westminster Synod had included Saturday working. As an experiment, to allow for members who naturally find meeting during the week difficult, this was probably a good idea. However, the downside came with squeezing the business into two and a half days and thus causing a number of fringe meetings to become unviable. Synod members do need that time to network and discuss things informally.

Normally our first day of Synod would run through to 7pm and be followed by worship. Today the day was cut short because 11% of Synod were off for a bash at the Mansion House.

Nevertheless, we had the opportunity to discuss recommendations for change to the Crown Nominations Commission (CNC), to hear crafted answers to crafty questions and to be able to have a constructive dialogue over the shape and content of the agenda. This latter debate was in the context of a small but valuable innovation. The item has always been referred to as a Report by the Business Committee. This time this was a subtitle to the document which was entitled "Guide to the February group of sessions". So often a change of name can lead to a change of culture.

The CNC recommendations arose from a series of initiatives and concerns. The fiascos in recent times where appointments have not been possible with the current rules or have been highly criticised by vocal minorities - resulting in withdrawal of the selected prospects - are coupled with a number of other areas where the rules need to change. The debate was a good one which resulted in the report being noted and further work to bring about change will now take place.

In the evening I attended the AGM of the Queen Victoria Clergy Fund. This is a charitable organisation, founded in 1897, which distributes small amounts of money via the Dioceses to clergy who have a particular need. The grants to a

Diocese ranged from £230 to £8,717 in 2017 (a total of £150,000 across the two Provinces). Very valuable!

Friday 9th

Our relationship with the Anglican Communion is occasionally fragile. There is a subset of the Primates who are highly critical of the progressive stance being taken by others - particularly over human sexuality issues. As a result, the usual 10 year interval between meetings of the entire Communion has been stretched. The next Lambeth Conference will be in 2020 rather than 2018.

Preparatory to this, Synod was invited to affirm the Companion Links that exist between Dioceses from different Provinces. To set the scene for that we had very moving contributions from three Archbishops from around the world.

The Most Revd Dr Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town and Metropolitan of Southern Africa, The Most Revd Humphrey Peters, Bishop of Peshawar & Moderator of the Church of Pakistan & the Most Revd Dr Winston Halapua, Bishop of Polynesia and Primate and Archbishop of the Anglican Church Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia came with greetings from their respective Provinces but also with sound advice regarding our relationship with the rest of the world. It was especially moved by the Polynesian, Bishop Winston, who invited us to think carefully about the impact of our misuse of the earth's resources in the West on Oceania.

Our relationship with the Earth was further highlighted in the debate on Food Waste which helpfully reminded Synod of the enormous amount of food that is ditched because of poor practices amongst some retail outlets. There was a lot of concern over the use of Best Before Dates. Humorously, one contributor to the debate remarked that she had seen a BBD on a jar of Honey despite hearing that usable honey had been discovered in an ancient tomb!!!

The Archbishop of Canterbury's contribution to Synod is often to give a direction and to set the tone for the sessions.

Today, he had kicked us off with a sermon on using resources wisely. This included a lovely story of a centenarian lady who, having been told she must have some care assistants even though she didn't think she needed them, decided that she would minister to them instead so as to give them a time to refresh in their busy day. Later, in his Presidential Address, he spoke of the need for change and introduced us to a theme of Faithful Improvisation.

The early afternoon was taken up with some necessary but not gripping legislative business.

There was also a request to change the See of Ripon to the See of Kirkstall. This resulted, eventually in a cricketing reference. Given the conversation earlier about companion links one wondered whether the See of Buckingham could be changed to the See of Lane End so that a companion link could be created between it and the revised See of Ripon!

The main attraction for the afternoon session was the debate on our relationship with the methodists. These discussions can invariably bring out the pernickety and the purists who want to resist change by pointing to the difficulty of adopting a new idea. The ideas here, that Anglican and Methodist clergy could begin to operate interchangeably, was likely to be resisted by some. In the end we voted to ensure that this idea could be pursued further but recognised that more work needs to be done on issues of episcopal ordination and eucharistic presidency.

Saturday 10th

The last day of our Synod was always going to be a time of deep reflection.

Dostoevsky said that you can tell how civilised a society is by the way it treats its prisoners. Clearly, we will be able to tell how safe our church is when we see that abuse is taken seriously across the board. It appears that there are many safeguarding issues bubbling up within our church and however much we have improved our safeguarding practices they will never fully satisfy everyone.

With the IICSA (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse) having started and our church being the subject of a first hearing from 5th-23rd March, it was timely that we had a presentation from the lead bishop, Peter Hancock. We had started the day with a prayerful, peaceful demonstration outside Church House where the two Archbishops, Bishops Peter Hancock, Sarah Mullally and Rachel Treweek and many others joined with Abuse Survivors to show solidarity with them.

After the presentation many of us met with the survivor group and I found amongst them some sense of hope that things would happen but also an equal dose of disappointment and frustration. One person told me that he felt that there would be some victims of abuse that were close to the edge of despair. In some cases the victim has found that the way the church has been treating them was almost worse than the physical abuse. Each member of Synod had been given a very useful booklet which told survivor stories in their own words. The book "We asked for BREAD but you gave us STONES" is available for download [here](#).

While the meeting with survivors was taking place, Synod debated the need for a Canon for Religious Communities to be a framework for religious life.

Although on the face of it this appears disconnected from other issues, it would act as a code of practice including guidelines over safeguarding.

This was followed by a useful presentation on the strides being made by the digital communications team. Showing us the impact of the #GodWithUs campaign in a world where there are 330m twitter users and 2bn facebook users is a wake-up call. The only irony was that many Synod members had had 2 days of frustration getting on to Church House WiFi.

After lunch we had a gem of debate on valuing people with Down's Syndrome. In a world where people with Down's Syndrome have greater longevity than ever before there is still a presumption that a diagnosis of potential Down's is "bad news". Our church is working with others to change that presumption. It sounded as if this was a debate not worth having on the face of it and many outside of Synod, looking at the motion alone, would wonder why we weren't already valuing such people. Why should we vote on such a motion? The answer was twofold. The need to vote was to build up that we were part of a coalition attempting to change perception. However, the voting for the motion, by itself, was only part of that. Crucially, this was a debate where the debate itself was almost more important than the vote (which at 284 For / 0 Against was not surprising)

Throughout the 3 days we had opportunities for worship and I had the privilege of leading evening worship on Friday. On Friday morning we sang a hymn with words by June Boyce-Tillman. The second half of the first verse has these words :-

We'll sing our songs of wrongs that can be righted;
we'll dream our dream of hurts that can be healed;
we'll weave a cloth of all the world united
within the vision of a Christ that sets us free.

I decided to conclude prayers in the evening with these words as they seemed to sum up the theme of the whole group of session. They were repeated in the morning worship on Saturday.

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