

DS25(15)

GENERAL SYNOD REPORT (JULY 25)

This Synod was noteworthy for a few reasons. Firstly, another July session having passed, it means there is just one year left in this quinquennium (and most likely, therefore, just 2 more meetings of the Synod, unless a November sitting is called). Secondly, it was our first Synod since Bishop Ruth began her ministry here in the Diocese, and it was good to share in the experience with her. And thirdly, the overall tone of the whole session was markedly different from the difficult past couple of years, in that it was in general much more friendly and collegial. Partly I think that links back to my first point: as the Synod runs on, people are more experienced, and understand more about how things work, and so are less likely to be fractious and argumentative. However it was also, of course, in part because there were no very controversial items – and most particularly, no discussion about LLF.

As always, our days were long and full, always beginning and ending with worship, and fortunately this time we only had one late evening session! We always descend en masse upon York Minister on the Sunday morning, to worship with them, which is a real highlight of the York sessions.

The Archbishop of York gave the Presidential Address, making mention of the Quiet Revival, the Assisted Dying Bill, and the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, calling on us to be people of hope, and ending by quoting John 4:14.

As usual, we were joined by some special guests. We were addressed by Brigadier Jaish Mahan, who spoke movingly of his career (currently he is Deputy Commander of the 1st UK Division), and of his own Christian faith, and talked about how the Church, and Christians, could be ready to serve and care for those serving in the military. We also welcomed the Most Reverend Andrew Chan, Archbishop of Hong Kong (who was also the preacher at York Minster), Canon Chuck Robertson from the Episcopal Church in the United States, and the Right Reverend Jan Otto Myrseth, Bishop of Tunsberg. And, on the final morning, it was our privilege to hear from the Most Reverend Hosam Naoum, Primate of the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East. This was a particular highlight, and it was extremely moving and sobering to hear from him, given the desperate situation that part of the world is currently going through (and indeed some members of Synod felt very strongly that we should have had an additional item tabled on our agenda to enable us to discuss the Israel/Palestine situation, but it was decided not to do that). Archbishop Hosam thanked us for our prayers, and was grateful for the statement made by the House of Bishops. Following his address (which I recommend you read or watch in full), the Archbishop of York prayed for him, and they exchanged gifts.

All sorts of matters of legislative business were discussed – from legal officers annual fees, to changing rules about how armed forces' chaplains are licensed. There were also a number of finance/administrative items, including the Archbishops' Council budget, and the annual report of the Audit and Risk Committee.

Unusually, in my Synod experience, we did some liturgical business, debating (and ultimately approving) the creation (in the liturgical calendar) of a Festival of God the Creator, and a Commemoration of the Twenty One Martyrs of Libya.

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Something that had generated a lot of media and personal interest in the run up to Synod was a Diocesan Synod motion brought by Hereford Diocese on the redistribution of funds. This was first brought in February, but adjourned due to a lack of time. The basis of this was a desire from some quarters, particularly articulated here in the Hereford motion, for funding (currently held centrally and distributed by the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board (SMMIB) in response to funding bids) to instead be divided up between dioceses to enable them to spend it as they see fit (and most particularly on increasing the numbers of stipended clergy) rather than their having to write bids and create special projects. An amendment was brought by the Bishop of Sheffield, a Church Commissioner, which somewhat tempered the original motion, not dismissing it in its entirety, but rather nuancing it, calling for greater engagement with dioceses as to how many is distributed, and calling for a full debate in the future. This amendment was supported by the Bishop of Hereford, and subsequently very strongly carried, as was the then amended main motion.

For quite some time now at Synod we have been discussing the subject of Governance, specifically how the 'back room' functions of the Church of England are organised. Motions go through quite a number of different stages as they are amended and finessed, and so generally they come back to several different Synod sittings to be discussed before we get to 'final approval' – this was that time for the National Church Governance Measure, which has been led by the Bishop of Guildford. This motion will make quite a number of changes to how things are run behind the scenes, although it may not make all that much difference to many people's day to day experience of the Church of England. Ultimately it seeks to streamline what are called the 'NCIs' (National Church Institutions), and make things run more smoothly.

It was my joy on Sunday afternoon to give a presentation on Church Growth and Revitalisation, sharing with Synod some highlights from research carried out into this area. I then hosted a panel, and Synod heard from various people (including some of the soon-to-be-co-opted Synod youth panel) of their experiences of church growth in their contexts. There were questions from the floor, which the panel then discussed and answered. I may well be biased, but I felt it was a really encouraging point in Synod, where we heard lots of wonderful stories of how God is at work.

Similarly encouraging was the item celebrating 10 years of Thy Kingdom Come (postponed from February when we ran out of time), led by the Bishop of Blackburn, and again giving lots of opportunities for people to share stories of how they and their churches have engaged in TKC and seen God move.

There was one big safeguarding item on the agenda this Synod, and that related to the issue of Redress for victims and survivors of church abuse. We received the report from the Steering Committee who have worked on this measure, and we also considered the Rules relating to its implementation. The strong hope of Synod is that the Redress Scheme will be up and running as soon as possible. The Bishop of Winchester has chaired the Redress Project Board, and that group, which also included survivors, has been working on these proposals for some time.

DS25(15)

One of the ways in which Synod members can highlight important issues is by bringing Private Members' Motions (PMMs) – anyone can propose a motion on any topic, and if it receives 100 signatures from Synod members then it will be considered for debate by the Business Committee. During this session we discussed 3 PMMs.

One of these related to clergy pensions, following on from a previous PMM last year. This sought to hurry along the process which has theoretically been agreed to. In light of proposals brought elsewhere at this Synod by the Pensions' Board, the motion was amended, and approved unanimously.

A second PMM called upon the House of Bishops to submit to an internal governance review. The response from the House of Bishops was that they had indeed decided to undertake a review, but the bringer of the PMM was unsatisfied by this and argued that it should be a full and independent review. After some discussion and debate, a motion was brought to 'move to next business,' and this passed, meaning that the item fell away,

The third PMM related to the document 'Issues in Human Sexuality,' a 34 year old document which, since its inception, it has been compulsory for all those discerning a vocation to ordained ministry to read and affirm their agreement to. The PMM contended that the document was outdated, most particularly in its use of language which would now be considered obsolete and offensive. As this item approached on the agenda there was some concern that it could become a proxy LLF debate, with battle lines drawn. If the request had simply remained that the document (generally called 'Issues' for short) were simply withdrawn, it's possible that the motion would not have passed, or at least would have been very vehemently debated, because of concerns that it would leave nothing for potential ordinands to be held accountable to. However, an amendment was brought which suggested that, were 'Issues' to be immediately withdrawn, it be replaced for the purposes of vocational conversations by the Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy, a well-known document already in existence, which covers matters of conduct in many areas of life. This amendment drew widespread support from across all theological positions, and so the amended motion was very strongly supported.

As you can see, the time we spend at Synod is packed very full indeed – and that's to say nothing of the additional fringe gatherings, committee meetings, and networking over mealtimes which takes place. It won't be long now until the elections for the next quinquennium, so do consider whether serving on General Synod might be something you would be interested in doing – and do speak to any of the current members if you would like more information.

Kate Wharton