

Nick Harding's General Synod Diary 8-12 July 2011

Friday 8. The papers, having arrived a few weeks ago, have been read at least briefly, and I am now prepared for another few days on the University campus at York for General Synod. Having set up a list of 30 Synod members who are interested in children's ministry, I circulated to them comments and observations about the items on the agenda that may have a particular bearing on children and those that work with them.

York campus is really nice, though slightly blighted by the campus lake ducks and what they leave behind on paths and grass! I arrived in good time and settled in my room before the opening of synod, sadly without **Archbishop Sentamu** who is currently ill. The highlight of the first session was the speech from the **Archbishop of Albania**, His beatitude Annastasios. He spoke with passion about how the church had to start from nothing in 1991 after many years of decay and illegality, and some of the challenges since. This was followed by a brief update on how business sent for Royal Ascent is going, and the usual debate on the **Business Committee report**. Many people spoke about how Synod is too slow in responding to current issues – Sudan, Middle East, Government cut-backs, and so on. I agree that by the time Synod gets around to discussing real and current issues the moment has often passed. After this two more business went through with only a few grumbles – appointments to the **Archbishop's Council**, and the formalising of the **Legal Advisory Commission**. Then optional worship, a rather long BCP, led to time for tea, and the usual good quality self-service food.

The final session of the first day of Synod is always **Questions**, and the one I asked was dealt with. I wanted to know what had happened to the results of the Regeneration Summit, a gathering of Bishops and young people in Sheffield in March. I got an answer that assured me that the Archbishop's Council was dedicated to listening to young people, so as a follow-up I asked whether they were also dedicated to listening to children as well as teenagers. **Pam Bishop** asked a question about whether accessible papers could be produced to help lay people in churches understand important but complex issues such as the Anglican Covenant. The day closed with prayer. And so to bed...via the bar for a quick drink and catch-up with Bishop Paul.

Saturday 11 July. After breakfast and preparing papers and reports for the day I headed for the Hall for an introductory speech from **Archbishop Rowan** about how we do mission and look forward to growth, before splitting off into groups for a morning of **group work** discussion and activities to encourage us to listen to each other and think about how others see the church. I found this quite enjoyable, as my group was led by the Bishop of St Albans, who had a lovely way of leading the group. Not everyone else I have spoken to had such a positive morning!

Lunchtime was spent in a meeting of the **Penal Affairs Group**. I really value these groups, where those who share an interest come together and share experiences. We discussed in some detail the church's response to the current Green Paper on Sentencing reform. Many of us, including myself as a Magistrate on the Mansfield bench, are concerned about how significant financial cut-backs are affecting Her Majesty's Court Service and Probation Services.

The long afternoon saw a tetchy Synod not always going the way people would have expected. In particular Synod voted against the proposed **revision of fees** for weddings, funerals, and so on after a very long debate. The view is that a 'one size fits all' approach to fees imply does not work, and so the current fees remain in place until a revised plans can be proposed. Other tidying-up legislation relating to loopholes in the **marriage measure**, and pensions on in the Diocese of Sodor and Man, went through easily. Worship at the end of the afternoon focused on **Sudan**, and it was worthwhile to stay for longer than usual to pray and focus on the struggles there. Then a quick meal, and back for the final debate.

The final session of the day saw our own **Bishop Paul** ably proposing a motion on behalf of Rev Mark Ireland, who since putting the Private Members Motion forward has been appointed to Archbishops Council. I assisted Bishop Paul by sitting on the platform with him and taking notes of what speakers said

so that he could reply to those points. The motion proposed that the national church develops a strategy for Dioceses, deaneries and parishes to forward **Mission Action Planning**. A good debate was had, with two amendments strengthening the original motion. A gathering with a few people who work on a national level with and for children followed, then I was off to my room to sort papers and do a few e-mails.

Sunday 12th July. Early rise and early breakfast before a good walk to a cafe in York where I met up with a colleague to share information and get advice about our Diocese's wonderful Church History Project. To do this I had to skip the annual service at York Minster, where the Bishop of Denmark spoke. Reports back tell me it was a lovely service.

After lunch the debates started again. First we looked at the challenges for ordination education and training in the current climate of change for **Higher Education**. A very good report has been prepared to cope with these issues in the short term. The proposals include a cap on the costs of courses, and no family subsistence being given to those being ordained over the age of 50. **Colin Draper** supported the report in his role as a member of the Council of St John's College. In the vote synod supported the report and recommendations. Then followed another debate on the very slow progress being made concerning work and **joint-working with Methodists**. There are areas of agreement and tension, and both sides think the other side is being slow on certain things. After the introduction by the Bishop of Coventry our own **Canon Tony Walker** spoke. He explained well the work that goes on in the Retford area, and encouraged the Joint Implementation Board to move forward in its work. The debate continued well, and was overwhelmingly carried.

The final business of the afternoon was a long and good-natured but contentious debate about formalising the admission of **adults to Communion before Confirmation** in a motion brought by the Diocese of Bradford. It raised a lot of issues around the importance of Communion, the place for Confirmation, and so on. Lots of procedural motions were raised, including 'passing to next business', which was carried. This means that the motion that was brought is abandoned, and the subject can't be raised again until the next Synod in 2015. **Worship** was led, with a reflection from the Bishop of Christchurch, New Zealand. She talked about some of the work the church has done since the devastating earthquakes of the last 10 months.

Over a rushed salad I joined others at a fringe meeting from the **Children's Society** concerning their Runaways campaign. Their research shows that in Britain an average of one young person runs away from home every five minutes! This startling situation has to be something that the church takes an interest in, and I'll be looking at ways to push this information out around the diocese. Then back to the chamber for the non-contentious **Audit Committee report**, followed by a good Powerpoint presentation concerning the work of the **Archbishops Council**. There followed questions for the council, which in the main were positive and for clarity, with only a few people using the opportunity to 'have a dig'! The evening ended with prayers at just before 10pm, and this time I went straight off to bed via a walk around the lake. I reflected on the numbers in the chamber today, which fluctuated wildly. Working on the basis that everyone except Bishops are elected to be there, I wonder whether the electorate know that their reps are not always listening to debates and voting. Of course, at times we all need a 'comfort break' or a drink, but sometimes attendance is disappointing. I would say that as one of those who doesn't skip debates, and it is not aimed at any of our colleagues from S and N – our Reps and Bishop are all really good at attending and sitting through debates.

Monday 13th July. I had an early start, giving myself time to get ready for another day of debates, and to work on a speech to prepare just in case I get called to speak. I skipped breakfast (muesli bars have their uses) and headed early into the chamber to get a seat in a suitable position to be called to speak, next to our **Archdeacon Peter Hill**. After worship the synod was reprimanded over refusing to accept the Bishop of Dover as chair of the **Business Committee**. He spoke very personally about the feeling he had of not being trusted and therefore withdrew from being nominated, and the **Archbishop of Canterbury** also

spoke of the way this matter was treated. Two issues here – there is concern that a Bishop should not take that position as they also have a role of influence, and the appointment process is not transparent. All in all it made for a painful start to the day. Then to action, and slight revisions to the **Marriage Measure** went through easily before we got on to discussing the next stage of **new Eucharistic Prayers for use with children** (officially - when a significant proportion of the congregation are children). It was quite a long debate, with plenty of good suggestions. No-one said that these prayers are not necessary, but there were a large range of views on how good (or not) they currently are. A number of speakers spoke of the need for more imagery and creativity in the language, and **Peter Hill** called for more poetry in the words. **I spoke** of the need to take away the option for the child involvement in responses and questions to be used or not used. I think that only by making the use of their responses compulsory will these new prayers really have the creative and participatory edge they need. The task that the revision group has is a tough one. They need to balance fun with seriousness, imagery with concrete language, short length with lots to say, and repetition versus variety. So the prayers take one more step forward overwhelmingly supported by General Synod. The morning finished with a debate from the Diocese of London challenging the current system **for lay members of General Synod being elected**. Many people spoke on both sides, and there seemed to be a genuine feeling that often the 'right' people – young, minority ethnic backgrounds, etc – do not stand and are not elected under the current process of Deanery Synod members electing their GS reps. The motion was passed with a slight and improving amendment, showing that synod in all houses (Bishops, clergy, laity) wish to see Synod being more representative.

At lunch I joined nearly all of our S and N reps at a fringe meeting concerning the **Big Society**, and got into really interesting discussions about what the church should do, the balance of protest and action to help people who are damaged by budget cuts, and replacing statutory initiatives with church-led ones. The challenges are huge, and the church must have a real part to play.

Afternoon business began with an engaging and challenging debate from **CMEAC** (Committee for **Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns**), a group led by Sonia Barron from Nottingham. The debate was a really good exploration of what churches across England and Europe do to encourage ministry from those from minority ethnic backgrounds. There needs to be a concerted effort to encourage more appointments onto boards, committees and the ordained ministry from those from minority ethnic backgrounds. The motion to press on with this work was carried with only one vote against! The main business of the afternoon was the **Archbishop's Council budget**, and this was presented well and didn't raise a great deal of comment. One area of concern was the reduction of the budget at national level for an officer to oversee ministry with deaf Christians and those with disabilities. While I see the need to cut budgets and make lower demands on Dioceses, the role of national advisers is vital to how the church is seen to care...or not care! We don't see a reduction in admin staff at Church House, but we do repeatedly see advisers losing their posts. The Archbishops Council tries to balance the books, but seems to need to be reminded that the national church institutions need to be focused on mission, not admin! After a brief debate on a following motion concerning every diocese reporting their staffing levels was voted down we moved on to the final issue of the afternoon – the multi-faith work of the **Presence and Engagement** process, and the Government's grant of £5 million to the **Near Neighbours Project**. Near Neighbours is about building and developing community through faith groups working together. The debate gave us lots of stories from around the country, and was wholeheartedly supported, and we finished the afternoon with worship based on United Reformed Church liturgy in preparation for the last debate of the day.

Evening meal was a gathering of all the **Southwell and Nottingham reps** with Bishop Paul to talk through how we feel Synod has gone, and look at how we better communicate General Synod to the churches of the diocese. It was great to relax together, and eat around a table rather than on my lap while listening, discussing or working like happens at the fringe meetings!

The final session was given to a long report on conversations between the Church of England and the **United Reformed church**. Some of the divisions and difficulties go back centuries, and still seem to be present. But most speakers talked warmly of the work that goes on in unity. Indeed, in our diocese I am in regular contact with our local URC youth/children equivalent. Anyway, the debate and proposal to move forward as together as possible was easily approved. And so back to my room for a sort-out, packing, and a good sleep before the final day tomorrow.

Tuesday 14th July. Got up plenty early enough to pack my bags in the car and have a leisurely breakfast before the business of the day. The first session opened with prayers, and then we got our teeth into the day's business, beginning with a statement from Archbishop Rowan about **Christians in the Holy Land**. There are real problems for Christians, and so a conference next week sponsored by the C of E and Catholic church, followed by the launch of a special fund, should raise the profile of Christians who feel they are being forced out of their homes and communities. The **Church Commissioners** then presented their annual report, as always focused on how their money is spent to further the work of the church. A number of questions raised concerns about specific investments in certain businesses and companies, but generally the report was well-received.

The final business of this group of sessions was to debate a report from the **National Society and Board of Education** concerning the 200th Anniversary of the National Society and the current dramatic changes in education. Many speakers told of their positive experiences connected with church schools, and the challenges in reaching out to other schools and supporting RE teaching. A few brave speakers talked with passion about the current confusion and fracturing of the state education system, and challenged the Board of Education not just to quietly go along with the changes, but to speak out when they are wrong and serve communities poorly. There was much support for Christians being involved in education and teaching across the curriculum as well as RE, including during a clear speech from **Bishop Paul**. I agree with all the sentiments to support church schools, but feel strongly that we also need to invest in the 90% of children and young people who do not go to church schools. If the energy the church nationally and locally invests into church and community-based children's work at the level it does into church schools we would have plenty of workers engaging effectively with children, and nearly all churches would be awash with all-ages! An amendment adding mention of Higher Education was supported, and the debate ended with very positive support for the National Society.

And now to **two final traditions** – first the **Archbishop of York**, who has been here only for today due to his current illness, said a few words and closed the sessions, and second - I headed home thinking about what I had been involved with over the last five days. I retain an awareness that Synod does have a significant part to play in the life of the church...but it can all seem rather archaic and slow! With no sessions needed in November I will be looking forward to **London General Synod in February** next year.