

General Synod Diary February 2011

The papers arrived in two large envelopes a few weeks before this rather short forthcoming synod, so after reading the papers and submitting a question for answer on the first day of synod, it was time to start receiving requests for those interested in a **synod members e-mail forum** for children and children's ministry. After much careful negotiation I managed to get a flyer sent out in the synod papers and received a steady flow of e-mails requesting to join. After reading the papers I sent out an e-mail highlighting issues on the agenda within which people may want to raise issues around children. All the reps from our Diocese met with Bishop Paul a few days before the start of synod to go through the agenda and look at issues from the Diocese point of view.

Monday 7th February 2011

To the train, and straight down to London for a difficult **House of Laity meeting** which failed to elect the on-going (or rather, now NOT on-going!) chair of the Dioceses Commission. The main issue seems to be that the nominee is not a member of the General Synod, and surely those who want these positions should be members of synod. Not an easy or pleasant debate, and not a great start.

Main business began in the usual way at with welcomes, reports of deaths, report of progress of legislation previously passed, and then the debate on the **business** ahead of us. This was typically tense, with people calling for more outward-looking issues to be discussed (including Colin Slater), and other expressing concern at this shortened synod's length.

The meat of the afternoon was an address from the **Secretary of State for International Development**, Andrew Mitchell MP, who spoke well, and answered (to an extent) the questions he faced. Bishop Paul asked him about long term plans for aid and giving, but he avoided the question, instead repeating rhetoric about current promises.

The next debate was a move to demand a 2/3 majority in all three houses when the **Anglican Covenant** finally gets approved (or not!). There were many hidden agendas here concerning the power of the houses, raising the bar for this approval, and issues around the church and sexuality. The Archbishop of York made a clever intervention which I suspect swayed the debate. All very interesting...but the motion was lost after a long vote with us all processing through various doors, as the electronic voting had failed!

The evening ended at 7.15 after about 80 minutes of **questions**, with the usual mix of interesting, incisive, and occasionally amusing comments. My question concerned my suggestion that the church runs a **national 'Beginnings' project** after it has completed the current successful 'Weddings' project. I was also surprised to hear my

name and one of my books mentioned in an answer the Bishop of Oxford gave to another question!

After business ended the **Diocesan reps** from Southwell and Nottingham all headed off for a meal together...a useful time to discuss issues on the agenda, share our thoughts, and relax a little. Then off to the Docklands Travelodge again....a longer journey, but a lower price! On the way I followed up a couple of work phone calls, and did loads of e-mails!

Tuesday 8 February

The morning came rather too quickly, and feeling rather weary I headed with the everlasting stream of commuters back into central London. I really do wonder how those who do this every day (half an hour standing on a stuffy, crammed tube train) manage it! Once at Church House the day began with a very pleasant **Holy Communion** service led by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Then to business.

The main items for the morning were various tidying-up revisions to the **Clergy Discipline measure** in the light of experience of the measure in use over the past 6 years or so. It was a bit of a heavy debate, with no strong voices against and most speakers generally supportive of the changes. The legislation was easily passed and on time, leaving room for the morning to end with a presentation concerning the church and **Ethical Investment**. This is an important area of work, often provoking debate and strong views. There's a balance to be sought between those who are activists and lobbying groups, and those who have the responsibility to negotiate with our large sums of money.

Lunch time fringe meetings always offer up more options than are possible to attend, and I opted for a challenging and slightly harrowing presentation from the **Childrens' Society** concerning children and young people who run away. One major issue that was raised is a real concern that some targets and standards set by the last Government may not be carried forward by the current one, leaving more children at more risk.

Afternoon sessions began with the Archbishop of York's **presidential address**, calling us all to add value to the life of our communities. This related well to the following debate on the Archbishop's Council report **Into the New Quinquennium**. A large number of speakers raised points gently in favour or pointing out omissions, but no-one was called to point out the sad lack of explicit mention or ministry with and evangelism/mission to the 90% of young people who don't go to church schools. As ever, quite a few of us stood to make these points, but were not invited to speak. However, it was good that our own **Pam Bishop** made her maiden speech, inviting the church as a whole to consider the role of the laity in church administration and organisational leadership.

The appointment of the Chair of the **Business Committee** – usually a simple ‘nod through’ – fell foul of many people who have concerns that appointing a Bishop (Dover) who is also a member of the Archbishop’s Council to the role removes their independence. A difficult debate followed, the chair was not appointed, and the Business Committee is left with a range of inexperienced people and no chair. This was probably a victory of principle over practical! The **Clerk to the Synod** was appointed easily, and then followed a vibrant, exciting and encouraging presentation on **The Weddings Project**. During the following questions I again managed to speak in order to push the idea of a **Beginnings Project** looking at Baptism and Thanksgiving, and idea which gained momentum during synod.

The final business was to look at an initial paper on **fees**, particularly for weddings. An interesting range of views and examples were given in debate, and now the paper goes off for more work and firm proposals to come back to Synod next year. Then I stayed with others from our diocese for the EGGs meeting (Evangelical Group on General Synod), and a long meeting discussing some of the more difficult and challenging items on the agenda. There is always more to learn from people who share fellowship but also have strongly contrasting views. But this was another long day and late night, with my welcoming bed not reached until 10.45!

Wednesday 9 February

And so the final day of his synod is already upon us rather sooner than usual! Breakfast was a bit rushed because I wanted to get to Church House a bit early and sign some nomination papers for others who are standing for national committees. I have decided not to, as I have plenty of work to do in the Diocese at the moment, and can’t fit anything else in!

Morning began in the rather warm and stuffy chamber with worship, and then followed a debate on a paper from the House of Bishops concerning careful measures to enable, in exceptional circumstances, clergy to be considered for **Bishop roles** who have been through **divorce**. Lots of strong views expressed, but the paper was noted without any amendments being brought, and a following motion calling for more legal processes being rejected. The Diocese of Liverpool then brought a motion calling for more **liturgy for baptisms** for those less used to church. A really good debate followed, with **Peter Hill** speaking against, pointing out that the words we have are sufficient if used creatively. However, the motion was easily carried and slightly broadened by two amendments, and again the idea of a Beginnings Project came up with various speakers including the Archbishop. The morning ended with short speeches from the Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster and the Bishop of Guildford preparing the way for the afternoon’s debate on the paper ‘**Mary: Grace and Hope on Christ**’. And so to a meeting over lunch...

The lunchtime fringe meeting I chose was a presentation from three young people reps of the **National Youth Council** on involving children and young people in decision-making and formal meetings. It was a good session, with many of the things they suggested being equally valid for other groups often excluded from the church...those with no contact from the church, the elderly, etc.

Some e-mail and phone call work followed before the afternoon debate on **Catholic/Anglican discussions** and quite a few amendments. The paper being discussed is 31 dense pages, was released 6 years ago, and I am afraid I really struggled to get excited about it. But many good and interesting speeches were made, and in the end the motion to accept the report as a starting point for more debate and discussion was approved without amendment.

And so to **Farewells** to some key people who are retiring from their current roles in the church, the main ones being the Bishop of Winchester and the Clerk to the Synod, David Williams.

The afternoon **finished** just after 4.15, and while most other reps headed home I headed for suburban London to visit some family friends of my wife's parents. It was so refreshing and energising to spend some time with people who know nothing of church structures, church politics, and the detail of how to debate in General Synod. It was a useful and clear reminder that sometimes the church spends simply too much time looking inward and getting wrapped up in its own procedures, and a reminder to think, in every debate, 'What has this got to do with our churches, our parishes, our tough communities, and our mission?!'

This series of sessions has been varied, challenging, tiring, and stimulating. I am excited about some of the things that should now happen (more initiation liturgy and hopefully a Beginnings Project), and a bit bored by the Mary debate and some legal work we had to do. But that's just what it's like! **Next sessions** – York – July 2011.

Nick Harding 10/2/11