

Reflections on the November 2013 group of sessions of General Synod

This report has been produced on behalf of the Salisbury members of General Synod as a means of reporting back to the diocese. This time we are offering a more reflective report as blow-by-blow accounts of all the debates are available online and there is not a great deal of point in reproducing all that detail in this report.

Readers are encouraged to go online to explore the Church of England website:

<http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/general-synod.aspx>

where a link can be found to 'Reports of Proceedings'

Daily digests of this group of sessions can be found by following the link to the 'Media Centre'

We met at Church House in London, exactly one year on from the dreadful debate on the ordination of women to the episcopate in 2012. A year ago we suffered the shock of the legislation being defeated by just six votes in the House of Laity. Three things were painful about that vote. Firstly it is obvious that the majority of people in the Church of England want it to be possible for women to be ordained as bishops, so our actions were incomprehensible to the country at large. Secondly, the vote came at the end of a long process of discussion in which 42 out of 44 of the dioceses had already approved it. Thirdly, the debate itself proved to be a long, hard day of speeches in which many people simply trotted out their fixed positions. There seemed to be no engagement in the issue at hand, which was to approve legislation which had already been agreed by the wider church.

Since that time we have been on an extraordinary journey. Archbishop Justin has made reconciliation one of the hallmarks of his ministry and has appointed Canon David Porter as Director of Reconciliation at Lambeth. A new feature of this approach was that, at York in July, we spent a significant amount of time in facilitated groups. As a result of that process, Synod readily took up the suggestion of Bishop Pete Broadbent that, as we sought to produce a better solution and simpler legislation, we set up a steering committee which included people who disagreed over this issue and asked them to work out a solution. Such a group was set up, including our own Canon Jane Charman, under the inspired leadership of Bishop James Langstaff of Rochester. What is remarkable is what that group has produced. Reports of their meetings suggest that they had an uncomfortable time of it, but they persisted in prayer and dialogue and seem to have produced a solution that the vast majority of the Church of England can live with. Jane reports that every side feels that they have been taken seriously and have got something out of

it. What has been produced is an integrated package, which needs to be viewed and accepted as a whole. There may be some fine detail which needs to be tweaked, but the solution is one which almost everyone can live with.

We invite you to visit the Church of England website and follow the link to 'Agendas and Papers', then 'November 2013 Group of Sessions', where, under the heading of 'Wednesday 20 November' you will find:

GS 1924: Report of the Steering Committee

as well as the more technical **GS 1925 & 1926**

What the process of the last year has produced is a sea-change in atmosphere within General Synod, with a new feeling of trust and a belief that this particular struggle has been resolved. We spent another morning in groups, talking through the proposals, before engaging in debate on the Wednesday morning. In speech after speech members supported the new legislation. Prebendary David Houlding, a prominent member of the traditionalist catholic group, declared that *'the battle is over'* and described this as *'a resurrection moment'*. The Revd Rod Thomas, Chairman of Reform, described having been on the Steering Group as having been an uplifting experience. He would vote in favour of the legislation going forward, although he was not yet ready to agree to final approval next year.

The key elements of the package are the simple agreement that women will be ordained as bishops within the Church of England. At the same time the House of Bishops will be producing a Declaration which states:

- An unequivocal commitment to all orders of ministry being equally being open to all
- The need for all ministers to acknowledge this
- The need for continuing discernment in this matter in the wider Church of God
- The commitment to enable those who disagree over the ordination of women to flourish within our church
- Continuing pastoral and sacramental provision (without time limit) for those who cannot accept the ministry of women.

A further key element is provision for a proper process of dealing with grievances and the appointment of an Independent Reviewer. Debbie McIsaac spoke of the need for this person to be independent of the bishops.

The legislation needs to go through a revision process and it is planned that this whole process can be undertaken in full synod when we meet in February. It would be possible for the matter to then be referred back

to the dioceses in time for a final vote on the matter in York in July 2014.

Paul Boyd-Lee, speaking from a traditionalist evangelical point of view, has pointed out that for him there are still shortcomings, but a positive outlook, combined with the increasing cry for mission, in the sense of evangelism, *'makes for an encouraging and healthily exciting outlook for the C of E.'* Both Ian Bromilow and Chris Strain have expressed their pleasure that Synod seems to be more engaged in looking outwards in mission.

The legislation was sent forward for revision by 378 votes to 8 (with 25 abstentions). Because we now vote electronically, how each of us voted on any issue (in which electronic voting was used) will be published on the General Synod website.

We did discuss other things! There were key debates on Intentional Evangelism and on Church Schools. We had three important speeches from our Archbishops. Archbishop Justin spoke about what he has been doing in recent months, which was a welcome window onto the life of the wider Church. You will find a video link to this at:

<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5187/watch-archbishop-justins-presentation-to-the-general-synod>

Archbishop Sentamu gave the Presidential Address, in which he focussed on the issue of rising poverty in this country and the response of churches to this. You can find his address at:

<http://www.archbishopofyork.org/articles.php/3000/general-synod-presidential-address>

On the Wednesday morning Archbishop gave a homily, within the Eucharist, which focused on the centrality of the Cross.

Both Chris Corteen and Jane Charman spoke about proposals to change some of the voting procedures of synod. These were debates which, in a rather unsatisfactory way, had ended up being split between the July and November Synods. The likelihood of allowing electronic voting in the next General Synod elections was agreed, but attempts to change who qualifies as the electorate failed. Bishop Nicholas spoke in favour of a motion from the London Diocese, which he had originated as Vicar of St.Martin's-in-the-Fields. The motion called for a review of how synod works, the frequency of its meetings and the way in which debates take place and decisions are made. The motion was not carried. There is a feeling that change is needed. It was pointed out that 62% of synod is over 60 years of age, although it was also said that that reflects the reality of

our church membership. Yet there is a feeling that the way we are now handling the issue of women bishops is itself a profound change which must affect the whole life of the synod. Both within the debates and in conversations in the tea room there seems to be a new mood of optimism and shared engagement, for the sake of the mission of the Gospel. However the issue of whether Synod is really representative of the wider Church is not one which will go away. It is an issue we are likely to have to return to.

Chris Corteen has said that she found this group of sessions to have been positive and rewarding and she is pleased at the way in which we are beginning to realise that the way in which we have handled things in the past (particularly the ordination of women debate) may not have been the most helpful way to have done things. *'There was general delight and approbation about the way we are taking the new bishop legislation forward.'*

All this will be important when we come to consider the Pilling report on same-sex relationships. The report will be with the House of Bishops in December and is likely to be made available to a wider audience at some point 'soon' after that. There are already two private members motions at the top of the pile, awaiting debate, one stressing the uniqueness of marriage as the union between a man and a woman and the other allowing the possibility of individual churches to be registered for civil partnerships. We will have to face up to this issue in 2014 and it is to be hoped that we will have learnt something from the past twelve months of the value of prayerfully talking to each other, rather than campaigning against one another and seeking to defend fixed positions.

Other business dealt with a number of legislative matters. It came as news to us that sheep need a faculty to graze in churchyards, which somehow led on to grazing rights of giraffes being mentioned.

Overall this was a remarkable group of sessions. Not only was the progress we have made since twelve months before described as miraculous, but the whole mood of synod had changed. We meet again in London from 10th to 14th February 2014.

Returning to the issue of elections, the present General Synod holds its final group of sessions in July 2015. You might want to start reflecting on whom you might want to elect then, either identifying candidates to encourage to stand, or even standing yourself. Why not come to **So you're thinking of standing for Synod** in Salisbury on Saturday 1st February (10am to 1pm)? The Deanery Synod elections will be very important, for those elected will form the electorate for the General Synod elections.