

General Synod - February 2011: A Synopsis by Salisbury Members

General Synod met from 7th to 9th February 2011 at Church House, Westminster. Newly elected chairs of the houses of clergy and laity were presented to Synod.

Address by the Secretary of State for International Development

Andrew Mitchell MP enthused that his job was a dream come true. Our generation could do so much to rectify global discrepancies in opportunity and wealth. It was in our national interest to do so. He had seen the leadership of faith communities in many countries. Conflict and dysfunctionality mired people in poverty. As long as conflict continues people will be poor, miserable and unhealthy. He said that where justice and fairness prevailed, investment followed. Alone among the G20 countries, the UK will spend the UN target of 0.7% of GDP on development. Partnership with the private sector would create economic growth and our programmes to provide clean water, sanitation, health care and education would focus on results and be independently evaluated.

Thanking the Secretary of State (who had been warmly welcomed by Synod), the Archbishop of Canterbury stressed that the empowerment of women was absolutely crucial.

Report by the Business Committee

The Bishop of Dover said that the November and February Sessions had been light and the July Session might be shortened, but the February and July Sessions in 2012 would be heavy, dealing with legislation on women bishops and the Anglican Covenant. The Business Committee was considering whether meetings of the Synod should be shorter and more streamlined and how more papers could be distributed electronically. From the floor there were calls for a statement on Egypt, for action on the erosion of freedom of conscience for Christians, on the decline of religious education in schools and for consideration of the voting system for national elections. There should be more debates in Synod and fewer presentations; a female Anglican Bishop should address us in July. There were two speeches advocating longer synods.

Anglican Covenant

There was a brief debate on a proposal that, when it came to the vote (in 2012) on the *The Anglican Communion Covenant*, this should have to receive a 2/3rd's majority rather than a straight one. Whilst the proposer tried to suggest that this would show true resolve on the part of Synod, it was clear that the idea was to make acceptance of the Covenant more difficult. The motion was defeated but only after our, recently acquired, electronic voting machines had failed. We had to resort the traditional filing out through an assortment of doors.

Questions

Questions is a time for any member of synod to ask any question, which has to be answered by the lead person in the Church of England. Questions were asked about guidelines

for Messy Church; whether the Weddings Project would be extended to include baptisms; clergy pensions; the Code of Practice regarding women bishops; the current cuts in Government spending; copyright law; Church of England Academies; engagement in higher education; the theft of lead from church roofs; bats in the belfry; and solar panels.

Clergy Discipline Measure

First consideration was given to the **Clergy Discipline (Amendment) Measure** (GS 1814) which will amend the 2003 Measure. Proposed changes include matters appertaining to removal from office for belonging to organisations inconsistent with the Church's teaching on race equality, safeguarding breaches, convictions in secular courts and the non-contestation of a disciplinary case. One particular concern that was expressed and noted was with regard to the possible injustice of removing from office a respondent in a divorce who had accepted an "unreasonable behaviour" plea to avoid litigation without there being real fault. An amending **Code of Practice** (GS 1808) was also approved.

Ethical Investment Advisory Group Presentation

A presentation, followed by comments and questions was given by the Ethical Investment Advisory Group (EIAG) that works on ethical and governance issues for the 3 C of E National Investing bodies with total assets exceeding £8 billion. *These are the Church Commissioners, The C of E Pensions Board, and CBF C of E funds.* Our Church is amongst the UK's largest investors and so has an important opportunity and responsibility to promote Christian values within the international investment scene.

The EIAG's work has changed dramatically in recent times from giving a plain 'no' to firms involved with such as alcohol, pornography, gambling, and weapons, to a highly nuanced approach.

Employing this strategy the EIAG has directly engaged with the CEOs of BP, Shell, Walmak, Nestle, Primark, RBS, Vendanta (mining) and others as well as several supermarket groups. The results of this dialogue are very encouraging no doubt contributing to improved employment conditions, remuneration, pricing, and environmental matters, as well as other values important to us.

In essence, recommendations are towards a distinctly Christian and theological view of investment. Rather than confrontation or plain refusal, wherever possible the door is kept open for dialogue but when this becomes impossible and the business principles are clearly contrary to the Church's, then reluctantly disinvestment is likely to be advised.

Presidential Address

The Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, delivered the Presidential Address on the theme of 'Re-connection and refreshing the wellsprings of solidarity in England'. The Archbishop based his address on Luke 4: 43, '*I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose*'. He offered his reflections on how the Church of England has a particular

responsibility to advance the common good and strengthen the social fabric of the country in three ways: first, by asserting the value and importance of trust in God; secondly, by building up 'the wellsprings of solidarity' in our society by living alongside every community in every part of the country; and thirdly, by seeking to influence the national debate on key issues affecting society. In all this, our vision of the Kingdom of God - our mission statement - was set out by Jesus Christ in the Beatitudes (Matthew 4:1-12). These verses describe what human society looks like under the rule of God and the task and calling of each one of us.

Archbishops' Council: Challenges for the New Quinquennium

The challenges faced by the church, in the short/medium term, were presented by the Archbishop of York. These included: the increasing secularisation of society and attempts to marginalise religion; economic and social difficulties; the aging profile and declining size of congregations; and the retirement of around 40% of stipendiary clergy in the next decade.

In response to the above, three themes were presented to describe the church's response: contributing as the national church to the 'common good'; facilitating the growth of the church; and re-imagining the church's ministry.

In general, there was strong support by Synod but with an underlying tone of the need for greater urgency and more detailed action plans.

Appointment of Chair of Business Committee

Synod showed its teeth and prevented the appointment of the Bishop of Dover as chair of the Business Committee. Although Trevor Willmott is the most qualified candidate, members of synod felt that such an influential position should not be held by a bishop.

Weddings Project

We had an excellent presentation on the Weddings Project from Paul Bayes (now Bishop of Hertford) and Gillian Oliver. They emphasised that this is essentially a church growth project seeking both numerical and spiritual growth. Its aims are to achieve a 5% increase in couples marrying in church, to build up a sense that the church cares about marriage, and to care for couples and their guests so well that they will want to return to the church. Its strategy is to focus on 7 key moments from point of first contact to the first wedding anniversary when a difference can be made. There is statistical evidence that this approach is yielding results. Research also suggested that the role of the vicar is crucial to many people which prompted some interesting questions about the ministry of lay people. There was enthusiasm for a similar project on either baptisms or funerals as mission opportunities. More information at www.yourchurchwedding.org

Parochial Fees Policy

Further discussion took place about a proposed new scheme for church fees, which is likely to come into force in 2012. The new scheme will regularize such things as heating charges and vergers' fees, into one set fee. Concern was

expressed that the scheme does not tackle musicians' fees, including video fees.

Marriage after Divorce

Synod took note of a report that will sort out the issues surrounding divorced people who might be candidates for ordination as bishops.

Common Worship Baptism Provision

The proposal to make additional provision in Common Worship baptismal liturgy for the forms of the Decision, the Prayer over the Water and the Commission 'expressed in accessible language' originated at a meeting of small group of clergy in 2008 and came to General Synod via a Liverpool Diocesan motion. It was argued that the current provision was culturally alien and inaccessible many who attended infant baptisms, for whom the imagery and symbols were unfamiliar and the theology too complex.

Speaking to an amendment to the motion, Debrah McIsaac made a 12 second speech, one of the shortest in Synod history. With these amendments, The amended motion was passed and the Liturgical Commission will be asked start work on additional provisions for the CW baptismal liturgy expressed in accessible language.

ARCIC: Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ

A long overdue debate was held on the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II) document on The Blessed Virgin Mary. Bishop George Slack, Auxiliary Bishop in the diocese of Westminster, addressed synod and gave a fairly defensive explanation of the report. He highlighted the fact that the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were sticking points for many Anglicans and that the commission had tried to deal with this. Christopher Hill, the Bishop of Guildford then argued that there can be a variety of ways of interpreting Scripture, but also wondered if ARCIC had taken feminist critiques of Mariology with enough seriousness. The debate that followed was in many ways brief and anodyne. This was very disappointing since this was clearly the most important item on the synod agenda. A number of amendments were not even debated and few really critical voices were heard. Many of those who wished to speak were not called because of the limitations of time. Speakers urged us to embrace the reality of Mary as a real woman and to see her as an example of the effect of grace. Among the few probing voices was that of Christine Corteen who, in her maiden speech, enquired why Marian doctrines should be given such prominence in ecumenical discussions when there were other more important things we need to concentrate on.

Farewells included tributes to Shaun Farrell (Head of the Church's Pensions Board), David Williams (Clerk to the Synod) and the Bishop of Winchester

For fuller reports, please go to the Church of England Median Centre at

<http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news.aspx>

The next group of sessions will be over the weekend of 9th/11th July 2011