

NOT ALL THAT IT APPEARED TO BE: GENERAL SYNOD, July 2011

It's July so it's York University and, while not my first time on the rather scattered campus – don't forget anything as it takes ten minutes to walk from your room to the Central Hall - it was the first residential meeting of the new Synod. This obviously offered the opportunity for new members to get to know each other and spend time in fellowship and prayer. It was also a much more vigorous and challenging Synod than the Agenda might have initially led you to believe before you left home.

We first welcomed our many ecumenical guests. His Beatitude Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana, Durrës and all Albania had been invited to address Synod. The Archbishop spoke movingly of the Christianity in his country from the first century AD that suddenly suffered 'a most cruel and long lasting persecution' from 1967 for twenty three years, when the atheistic Constitution banned all expressions of religion and brought about the complete dissolution of the Church in Albania. In 1990 the Archbishop was called back from exile in Africa to start a new missionary effort to reconstitute the Church of Albania. It was a very painful but successful resurrection. The Archbishop concluded with the theme of sharing and illustrated his thoughts by looking at the two lakes of Palestine: The Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Those two lakes have a principal feature in common and a basic difference. Both receive the water of the River Jordan. The Sea of Galilee receives the water and offers it to fertilize the southern regions. The second, the Dead Sea, receives the water and keeps it for itself. The first sea has plenty of life within its waters and around them. In the second there is no sign of life. The Archbishop concluded that 'Our Lord had nothing to do with the Dead Sea. He started his public mission and performed many miracles in the Sea of Galilee. Receiving and sharing is the secret for having life'.

So did we all have much to share? We all certainly entered the spirit of togetherness and the joy of companionship was very evident in the noise level at meals, in the bars and at the briefing sessions that covered issues ranging from Fresh Expressions to ecumenical relationships, plus all matters in between. Importantly, we really did get to know each other when we met on Saturday morning in small groups for reflection and discussion on ministry and mission. A quiz on Saturday evening tested all our general knowledge. Added to these activities was copious worship together, including Sunday service at York Minster when the Bishop of Copenhagen preached entertainingly on his experience of ministry in the North of England. The Archbishop of York was unable to join us but appeared briefly on our final day.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, in his address to Synod, emphasised that 'Christianity is not advice but news' and challenged us with the question as to 'What would not happen if the Church was not here?'. This might indeed be the case with the news in a private members motion moved by the Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham that there is 'an urgent missionary task facing the Church of England to reverse decades of numerical decline'. The Church of England might, indeed, cease to exist in twenty years time as our current generation of worshippers (average age 61) disappear and are not replaced. In exchanges, the Church was compared to a company 'impeccably' managing itself into failure. We need an urgent national recruitment drive. It was agreed that a National Mission Plan would be helpful. Andreas Whittam Smith, Church First Estates Commissioner, in the Church Commissioners session later, commented that the 'demographic time bomb' was, indeed, a crisis. What to do?

Bradford Diocese brought forward a motion which sought to remove the requirement from Canon law that communicants, as a general rule, be adults 'who have been baptised but who have not yet been confirmed and who are not yet ready and desirous to be confirmed'. There were speeches both in favour and against and an attempt to agree an amendment to the motion. The fact remains that fewer adults are coming forward for confirmation and that there is obviously not the appetite to challenge at the altar rail those who might not have been confirmed. Synod moved to go on to 'next business' which was carried by a show of hands. As a consequence, Synod cannot return to this motion again during this quinquennium. However, it does successfully raise a more complex issue than could be addressed in a single brief debate.

On a very positive note, the Draft Church of England Marriage (Amendment) Measure went through with a further broadening of the 'qualified connection' rule. This covers benefices in plurality, multi parish benefices, parishes where there is no church available but a centre of worship exists, or a former parish where pastoral reorganisation has caused the church to disappear. In addition, Banns can be read at not just the principal service but the largest or the most appropriate. As it was an amendment to a Measure we all had to vote by Houses (Laity, Clergy and Bishops). There was overall immense support. At the February Synod meeting the Marriage Project had been launched to great acclaim. Anything to encourage marriage and weddings in Church is to be welcomed. To that end, a proposed major increase in statutory wedding fees did not pass muster. One member gave a graphic description of his Church which, he claimed, with metal fence and gates, looked like a prison. He could not possibly justify charging the happy couple the same fee as for a wedding in a Cathedral.

Meeting Bishop Victoria Matthews, Bishop of Christchurch, New Zealand was, indeed, a high spot. Speaking at a meeting as a guest of the Open Synod group, invited by the Chairman, Caroline Spencer, the Bishop spoke movingly of the devastation in her Diocese caused by the multiple earthquakes that had destroyed so many lives, as well as the Cathedral and some 23 churches in the City. On the subject of women and the episcopate, the Bishop told us that, as a Canadian, her nationality had been the only perceived bar to her current appointment! I heard a member sitting behind me say 'Victoria has converted me'. Halleluiah, we are moving on.

Other matters, such as payments to the very important work of the Churches Conservation Trust, went through unanimously. The motion to approve twenty-eight lawyers on the Legal Advisory Commission was also unanimous, although witticisms abounded throughout Synod as to why such a large number was required. I am afraid I do know why. The legal work required herding such a diverse group as Synod into any kind of agreement and then to enshrine it in law is an undoubted challenge!

The final morning included a Presidential Statement by the Archbishop of Canterbury, reflecting his recent visit to the Holy Land. The Archbishop remains 'convinced that the seriousness of Christians in Israel and Palestine is still not well enough understood by many opinion formers and decision makers in the UK and elsewhere in the West'. No doubt we all reflected on this as Synod's budget was approved and everyone wended their way home. Synod will sit next in February 2012 unless there is a perceived need to assemble later this year in November.

Sally Muggeridge

If you want to know more, contact any of the Canterbury representatives

Bishop Trevor – Trevor.Willmott@bishcant.org

Archdeacon Philip – pdown@archdeacmaid.org

Canon Mark Roberts – revdmarkroberts@supanet.com

Sally Muggeridge – sally@sallymuggeridge.com

Dean Robert – hedyh@canterbury-cathedral.org

Canon Clare Edwards – canonclare@canterbury-cathedral.org

David Kemp – kemps11@btinternet.com

Caroline Spencer – caroline@eggarton.eclipse.co.uk