

General Synod: an (almost) historic weekend. York, July 2012

What on earth happened at General Synod? This was supposed to be the moment the whole Church of England had been waiting for for years and years: the final decision to approve the Women Bishops legislation. But we didn't do it. Instead we voted (by the fabled two-thirds majority) to adjourn the final approval debate so that the House of Bishops could look again at their late amendment to Clause 5 of the Draft Measure. Diocesan Synod members will know that we had an emergency debate on 4th July and asked the House of Bishops to do just that. But why? And what happens now?

Although the formal debate didn't happen until Monday morning, the whole weekend was overshadowed by it. Endless conversations 'in the margins' - on the train, over meals, at fringe meetings, in the bar, in corridors - as people tried to understand the dynamics and where other people were coming from. The encouraging thing was that these conversations were happening much more across the party lines: I sensed a new commitment to trying to work out the way forward together. We were further encouraged by Archbishop Rowan's memorable sermon in York Minster on the subject of frustration, which I thoroughly recommend (see <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/>).

The whole thing could have been over on Friday afternoon before the formal meetings of Synod even began. The House of Laity and the Convocations of the clergy met separately to decide whether or not to allow the final approval debate on Monday to go ahead (an established part of the formal process), and there was a move in the House of Laity to vote against the Measure and stop it dead in its tracks. The outcome of this vote was rendered even more uncertain by the fact that lots of us were delayed for hours by flooding on the East Coast line (was God trying to tell us something?). On our train a journalist from the Sun was gleefully wondering whether this flood would change the course of History, but we got there in time for the vote (happily for the Measure) and on we went.

Why adjourn? The House of Bishops' amendment, which made the provision for those opposed to women's ordination more explicit, was designed to make it more likely that the Measure would get the necessary two thirds majorities. But in fact the amendment increased the opposition substantially: it didn't go far enough for the opponents, and those in favour thought it would unacceptably undermine the position of women bishops, so nobody was happy. The delay gives the House of Bishops a chance to think again - this time following wider conversations with all interested parties - and General Synod will convene in November to try again. But it is now entirely clear that there is very significant opposition to women bishops in the House of Laity of this General Synod. We therefore have to face the fact that the Measure may not pass in November either, whatever the House of Bishops do.

What else did we do? We talked about world mission, fresh expressions, the opportunities for church schools in current government education policy, the public expression of faith (wearing crosses at work etc) and the ecumenical accompanying programme in Israel/Palestine with which a number of people from our diocese are associated (including Bishop Richard Llewellyn) - and basically agreed that all were Good Things. There was the usual round of arcane legislative business and financial matters, and at long last we signed off some Eucharistic prayers for use when children are present. A real highlight for me was a fringe meeting addressed by two inspirational young people from Zimbabwe who are working fearlessly for peace and reconciliation with communities in that troubled land.

The adjournment meant that Synod ended early, with no Farewell to Archbishop Rowan and many people leaving before the end of the business. And so I came home exhausted, hopeful that the House of Bishops will be able to broker a more acceptable form of words for Clause 5, but with a real sense of unfinished business.

Caroline Spencer