

The General Synod of the Church of England met in York on the campus of York University last month. The five day meeting ran from 3.00pm on Friday 11 July concluding at 1.00pm on Tuesday 15 July 2014. There are in total 467 representative members of General Synod – Bishops, Clergy and Laity.

On the afternoon of Friday we were convened and debated the first consideration of the **Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline** measure. This looked at proposals in response to reports from the Chichester commissaries. An important report, this brings into place a number of important changes that will help ensure that risk assessments are formally undergone. It imposes a duty on clergy, churchwardens and PCCs to take due regard of the House of Bishops safeguarding policies. In my Benefice we shall all be attending a training session early in August.

Whilst there was clearly some anxiety and anticipation of what one might call the 'big' main vote, our Synod agenda was carefully constructed. There was a sequence of necessary legislative business on what most of us felt (one way or another!) was the most important issue: **Women in the Episcopate – the ability for General Synod to agree that women could be consecrated as Bishops.**

We began the discussion on the afternoon of Friday 11 July with a Report by the Business Committee on the Article 8 Reference to the Dioceses. In the run up to General Synod the 44 Dioceses of the Church of England had been asked to vote (again) on their overall support to women becoming Bishops. They had already done so in 2012 when London and Chichester were the only two Dioceses that did not vote in favour. This second time round it was unanimous and all 44 Dioceses now voted in favour. This was an important step forward for Synod showing unity of purpose across the country and set us off to a promising and generous start – for we all fully appreciated that for some individual members of General Synod this issue had been, and will no doubt remain, difficult to accept. They were a minority finding themselves out of step theologically with the direction being taken by the majority.

This discussion was followed by the Final Drafting Stage for the Measure and Amending Canon, a pre-requisite for moving forward. The House of Bishops met on the morning of Saturday 12 July for consideration of the draft legislation under Article 7 of the Synod's

Constitution. The Agenda also allowed alternative scenarios for the afternoon of Sunday 13 July to enable the Convocations and the House of Laity to debate the draft legislation if a reference was claimed under Article 7.

NB: Article 7 is this: under this part of the Constitution of the General Synod *'a provision touching upon doctrinal formulae or the services or ceremonies of the Church of England or the administration of the sacraments or sacred rites thereof'* has to be referred to the House of Bishops and submitted for final approval by the General Synod in terms approved by the House. The Convocations of Canterbury and York, and the House of Laity, can also claim a reference once the matter is in a form approved by the House of Bishops, and prior to submission for final approval by the Synod. With these stages completed, Synod was to take the Final Approval stage during the morning or afternoon of 14 July. We all awaited Monday with mounting excitement, and also some apprehension.

On Saturday morning the Archbishop of York made a magnificent Presidential Address on the theme of choosing life and having courage 'to live in a life of uncertainty' seeing the world exactly as it is, choosing to love the Lord and walk in his way. We then had a wonderful distraction in the afternoon in the form of US writer and theologian Revd Jim Wallis on the subject of the 'Uncommon Good'. He gave us a magnificent and inspiring talk as the President and Founder of Sojourners Magazine, also the author of 'On God's Side'. Feeling fully courageous we spent the afternoon in group work on the same themes, ending with a debate on a motion from the Mission and Public Affairs Council.

On Sunday 13 July we all first attended the 10am sung Eucharist at York Minister where Jim Wallis preached and the girls and men's choirs sang magnificently. This was, as always, a great treat.

In the afternoon we received a presentation by the President and CEO Designate of the newly-established **Churches' Mutual Credit Union**. The aim of the CMCU is to provide a mutual ethical vehicle for tax efficient savings and affordable loans for clergy and staff of church charities. It is hoped that the establishment of the CMCU will help to support and strengthen the credit union movement and provide a viable, ethical alternative to both mainstream banking and pay day loan companies for people, irrespective of their financial status.

We moved on to debate the draft new **Additional Texts for Holy Baptism in accessible language** which had been drawn up by the Liturgical Commission and which have been passed by the House of Bishops to the Synod for First Consideration. I personally found the revised language very acceptable and spoke in support in the debate.

On the morning of Monday 14 July there was a presentation followed by a debate on a motion promoted by the Mission and Public Affairs Council. This was on **The Armed Forces Covenant and Community Covenant**. The motion invited many community bodies, including local authorities, churches and others to join the initiative which offers pastoral care for members of the Armed Forces Community. The opening presentation was made by the newly appointed Bishop to the Armed Forces, the Right Reverend Nigel Stock. A debate on the commemoration of the 800th anniversary of the **Magna Carta** followed on a motion moved on behalf of the Guildford Diocesan Synod.

We reached the afternoon's most awaited debate. It was chaired magnificently, sensitively and judiciously by the Archbishop of York. We were to debate until there was nobody left standing to speak! Some 85 speeches were made over a period of several hours in the very hot and relatively airless main convention hall of the University.

It was agreed that the voting, and the result of the vote, would be taken and received in silence.

General Synod then voted as follows in the three houses:

Bishops: 37 in favour, 2 against, 1 abstention.

Clergy: 162 in favour, 25 against, 4 abstentions

Laity: 152 in favour, 45 against, 5 abstentions.

Crucially, the necessary two thirds majority was this time secured in all three houses. The odd cheer filtered through from the gallery and was quietly quashed with stern remonstrative looks from both Archbishops.

The legislation will now move to the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament where it will be considered. This happened on 22 July so watch this space! Then, subject to parliamentary approval, the measure will return again to the General Synod in November when it will come into force following its promulgation (a formal legal announcement).

There appears to be a strong desire to expedite the appointment of the first female bishop in this country, although whether to a suffragan or diocesan role still remains to be seen. The first female could conceivably be appointed by the end of the year although timing will be subject to the requirements of vacancies arising. Amen I say to that, cognisant that we must share with and care for those for whom this is not, in all honesty, a result that can be joyously received. There were tears on all sides and concern for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The true measure of the legislation's success will be when gender is no longer seen as significant or relevant in the appointment of Bishops. We are still some time and distance from achieving that but first steps have now been approved. **Sally Muggeridge**