

Nick Harding's General Synod Diary 10-13 July 2015

This is a personal report of my time at General Synod, and not an official report. I hope you find it interesting and helpful!

The end of June. The papers for this synod arrived as usual in two large envelopes while I was away at meetings and on retreat, so I had limited time to sort, read and prepare....and there was a lot to read! From the beginning of the new synod in November all papers will be sent **electronically** unless members request otherwise. There are lots of issues to be looked at this weekend, with a real sense of tying up loose ends. All members of synod finished when synod finished on Monday evening, and many stood down. As with all synods, there are a huge number of issues to be dealt with, ranging from lots of legislation and legal stuff, with headline issues on **Safeguarding**, new **baptism liturgy**, **climate change**, **budgets** for the next year, **leadership** and the church, and the **shape of the church** in the future.

One thing I was prepared to do in advance was to propose an amendment to the legislation allowing people (particularly young people) who are regular communicants but not confirmed to **assist at communion**. The minor alteration through the amendment is designed to make things easier. With my speech ready I packed my bags with the usual heavy heart, knowing that I would go through the usual process of feeling out of place, and contributing in votes, in prayer and in reflection rather than much chance of being called to speak....except for the amendment, and by choice this time. As usual the sun shone, while I thought through the next 80 hours that would be spent in stuffy rooms and a hot main hall.

York University campus is a pleasant place, so after arriving and unpacking I walked to the **House of Laity** meeting to thank all those, including the chair of the House, who are finishing their time on synod for their service. It seemed strangely low key, with an air of tiredness, even right at the start of the sessions.

The afternoon session began in the traditional way, with many of the usual items to get us started including welcoming new members and ecumenical representatives. The initial address came from **Most Rev Dr Antje Jackelen, the Archbishop of Upsala**. Her talk reminded us of the grace of God in all circumstances, and the challenges the Christian church faces in our modern world.

Then the Archbishop of York gave us the **Presidential Address**, which was a dynamic examination of John 17, and rather longer than we are used to! This was followed by a brief update on how business sent for Royal Ascent was going, and the usual debate on the **Business Committee report**. This is an opportunity for people to raise issues that are not on the agenda, this time with people calling for a debate on the recent Budget and how the church is going to respond to the potential for additional poverty. Nothing changes quickly as a consequence of the debate, but we do hope that the Business Committee listens to views and considers matters raised, particularly as a new synod will be elected in September. As always, we then moved on to various **appointments**, some paid and some Synod members, for significant roles in the Synod and Archbishops' Council.

As the afternoon continued Synod moved on to look at some significant changes to our internal **standing orders**. Of course, it is hardly exciting stuff but much of it is necessary and I am grateful for the people who read and examine the detail. Then we were on to the first of two appearances of **Administration of Communion Regulations**, the legislation based on our Southwell and Nottingham Diocesan Synod motion from 2012. I moved the amendment, which was approved easily, preparing the legislation for final approval on Sunday afternoon. My starring moment over, I retreated to 'the back benches' where most of our diocese reps sit when not aiming to speak. The last item of the afternoon was a presentation from the

Ethical Investments Advisory Group, which keeps an eye on how and where the church invests its money. This was useful preparation for the debate on climate change on Monday.

The evening break was spent with the other reps from **Southwell and Nottingham** and our new **Bishop Paul**, helping talk through the issues on synod and discuss how it all works...or sometimes doesn't! This was a really good time with the others who have given their time, commitment and dedication to synod from our patch. Then back to the stuffy Great Hall for **Questions**. The sting has gone from this, as written replies are given in advance, and a few of the key people who answered were last-minute stand-ins due to illness. With the sun shining late into the evening, it was with a sense of relief that, at end of business just after 10pm, I gathered with a few others for a refreshing drink and headed for my room.

Saturday 11th July. After an early breakfast and preparing papers and reports for the day I headed for the main hall and the day's business, starting with **worship**. A morning of detailed and very important but in some cases partially dull legislation followed. The vital final approval of legislation relating to clergy behaviour and other **safeguarding issues** was seen through synod by the Bishop of Durham, and welcomed by synod. As this was a key vote it was conducted electronically, and carried unanimously in all houses. The other **legislation** related to amending stipends fund rules, voting systems, terms of service, and a very amended heap of legislation relating to simplifying the faculty procedure. With some of this taking longer than expected, some more work on Standing Orders was left undone and lunchtime arrived.

Lunchtime was spent with other members of the **Penal Affairs group** (judges, other magistrates, probation staff, etc) where we looked at how the recent significant changes in the work of probation services, private suppliers and agencies. The practical and helpful talk by two staff from South Yorkshire was enlightening. It is an interesting moral position that private companies are now making profits from providing probation services.

Afternoon session, and the hall was still very hot. It began with a **farewell** to the former Bishop of Gloucester, whose retirement last summer had not been formally marked. Bishop Michael Perham (who incidentally wrote a chapter in my last book, Ready to Share one Bread!) was greeted with a long standing ovation. Then we debated a report on **Senior Leadership**....a report that seemed to have been kicked into the long grass for a few years! Many people spoke, with some good theological points about leadership, the role of Bishops, and so on. It was a good debate, despite not leading to any great actions.

After that we approved more work on **Standing Orders**, getting our timetable back on track. The afternoon finished with a debate on **church unity** based around a report from the World Council of Churches. One of the more contentious issues was whether this report should be seen and discussed by dioceses, deaneries and churches. This is a difficult one – it is a big report covering lots of issues and it is difficult to see how (and whether) people in the pews would engage with it. Evening **worship** was fairly traditional and led by members of the Church of England Youth Council. It remains a source of frustration to me that, generally at Synod, worship represents only one style of the church's engagement with God! I raised this with the synod office and the reply simply said 'Most people seem OK with it....'

As usual, synod continues with fringe meetings through mealtimes, and this time I went to hear about a new campaign by the **Children's Society**. They have identified that 16s and 17s often face challenges when family relationships break down and statutory support sees them as adults rather than children and can, therefore, ignore their needs. This is a key issue, and I will be passing on the report to my youth colleagues Angela and Dave.

The evening was rather important and pointless at the same time. We have already been given the **Annual Reports from the Archbishops' Council and the Church Commissioners**, so their presentation and questions slots was a little lacklustre. After that, at 10pm, I headed to my room to connect with the internet and do some work, catching up on e-mails.

Sunday 12th July. I had three alarms set to ensure that I woke up and made my way to the Synod press office in time for a live interview with BBC Radio Nottingham at 7am-ish. Unaccustomed as I am (!!) to radio, the interview went OK and I headed for breakfast before taking a little more time to do some paperwork, and then had a break from synod by popping to Driffield for a coffee and a walk! I know I missed the annual **Synod service in York Minster**, but it was really refreshing to have a break from synod, formalities, and churchianity! I skipped lunch (breakfast having been rather substantial!) and then walked back to the hall for a significant afternoon.

The first work of the afternoon was the final approval of the new **Additional Baptism Liturgies**, which have already been tested in many parishes, revised, and adjusted by the House of Bishops. I was pleased to have been on the Revision Committee for these texts, and after another generally positive debate we voted, the voting having to be a 2/3 majority in all three houses. It was easily carried, so now the new words can be used from September 1st. Of course, there's still some debate over the lack of reference to 'the devil' in the text, and people are concerned that preparation would not be done properly.

The final work on **Standing Orders** followed, before the final approval of the new **Administration of Communion** regulations, which **Southwell and Nottingham** started. This was nodded through without anyone wanting to debate it, so all is well! Synod then got a bit bogged down with a motion from what was Wakefield diocese (now the diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales) calling for a national debate about the **nature and structure of the C of E**. This felt like the final fling of a diocese that no longer exists, and though broadly welcomed, synod felt that other current developments and reviews (Reform and Renewal) were already covering the work being asked for. A rarely-used mechanism, that of moving to next business, was supported by synod. This was tough for those bringing the motion from their diocese, but I think the right way forward. Synod does have a habit of continually asking for reviews and reports, so it was right that we wisely resisted yet another one.

The final work on the afternoon was a really interesting speech, presentation and Q and A from CMEAC – the **Committee for Minority Ethnic Concerns**. There is a dramatic and shameful lack of leaders in the Church of England of people from minority ethnic backgrounds, and the session explored why that might be, and what the church needs to do about it. We ranged from how appointments are made to theological exploration, with lots of good stories and sad accounts too. The afternoon business finished with an introduction to the **Bible study and discussion groups** we will be in on Monday morning, looking at the environment. Dr Paula Gooder, a really great member of synod and theologian, presented this and helped us get interested in the morning session.

Worship was very different this evening, led by members of St Michael le Belfrey, in York. This was based around modern worship songs, and was obviously appreciated by some and not enjoyed at all by others!

Evening meal was spent with a colleague from another diocese, and many members of synod returned for the final session of the day. The presentation and debate on the **Archbishops' Council budget and spending** for 2016 is always in this slot. Canon John Spence, Chair of the Archbishops' Council Finance Committee, again spoke well and freely without notes, and thoroughly answered questions. Some

speakers raised minor points concerning planned spending and talked vaguely about the need to save money. The votes, some of which were concerning huge amounts of money, went through as they always do! This was followed by a presentation from **Nigel Genders**, Chief Officer of the National Society/Board of Education. This was about a plan to provide better accredited training across the CofE for those involved in education. This may, once firmed up, also involve those doing children and youth work in churches and communities.

And so to a bit more social chatting and putting the church right before going to my room and spending until the early hours doing some e-mails and work in preparation for the rest of the week post-synod!

Monday 13th July

A good sleep, packing bags and putting them in the car, breakfast, and group work discussing some of the texts and ideas that we were introduced to last night on the church, theology, and **care for the environment**. I was fortunate in being in a small group with **Dr Elaine Storkey** who helped us all think this through, and really got my mind working. This led straight into the full debate in the hall on principles around climate change. A good and passionate debate was had, with a few amendments which received varied support. This debate in turn prepared the ground for the afternoon's work.

The **Mother's Union** fringe meeting I attended was based on the latest report they have produced around the **Bye Buy Childhood campaign**. This looks at how advertising can negatively affect children and their views on consumerism and sexuality. A good panel shared their thoughts and answered a range of questions. It is a good report, but the tide of big business pushing items to children and young people is a heavy tide to push back.

Afternoon took us back to the hall for the final time, this time to the long debate on our **investment policy** and climate change. The proposals were strengthened by some amendments which had to be carefully debated, and at one point synod got a little tied up with it all. Lots of good stories were told and the motion was carried with huge support from the members. At the end of this a few more members slipped out and presumably headed home, before the farewells that followed. The retirement slightly early due to ill health of the **Bishop of Lichfield** was marked with a speech from the Archbishop of Canterbury, while the Archbishop of York spoke amusingly of various members of synod and staff who are moving on and have contributed a lot to the processes of synod and the wider church.

And finally, for the first time at York, Synod ended with a service of **Holy Communion**. By this time about half of the members had left, but those remaining gathered with many synod and Church House staff for a gentle service and encouragement from the Archbishop of York to face the suffering that the Christian life brings....quite timely after four days at General Synod! Synod now being dissolved, the elections will take place in September and the new synod for five years will begin in November.

Over the past five years we have worked hard, made some really positive changes to the church, and moved many issues forward. But we have also wasted time and money, and got bogged down with factions. There's a lot that is good about it, but a lot that frustrates me too. Perhaps it is right to be frustrated....at least that means I'm not institutionalised yet. I hope to remain, when required, a rather awkward and challenging thorn in the flesh of the church, but also to go along with things, systems and processes that can really make a difference. Ultimately that's what it is all about.....

The full details of all debates, motions, amendments and voting is available on the Church of England Website. **If** I stand for election, and **if** I am elected, there will be another General Synod diary as I begin my 11th year in November.