

## Nick Harding's General Synod Diary 8-12 July 2016

**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 in the new usual way – downloaded from the Church of England website using a new app! Even though we were only doing business for 2 days there was a lot to read! There are lots of rather boring pieces of legislation to be looked at this weekend, with again a real sense of tying up loose ends of business completed by the last synod. The business includes various reports, legal stuff, with more meaty work on **Safeguarding, senior leadership, renewal and reform, finance, and budgets.**

This synod began after lunch on Friday, so I went to a meeting in Nottingham before dashing up to York to just miss the opening! As usual for York synods the sun shone, while I thought through next 80 hours that would be spent inside 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 **Landesbischof Ralf Meister from the Evangelical Church of Germany.** Among other things he talked of church unity and the common challenges we all face as churches across Europe. Then, instead of the usual Presidential Address at this point, the **Archbishop of York** gave us a more entertaining report on his sabbatical pilgrimage of prayer across the Diocese of York, with pictures, singing, and a set of beads that he used to help those he met pray and seek God. It was a really interesting presentation, and obviously a very effective time for him and the people he met. Then we had another interesting and fairly dynamic presentation from a few of those who went to the **Anglican Consultative Council** in Lusaka back in April. The general feel was that, despite all the rumours and negativity around how the Anglican Communion will or won't hold together into the future, good things are still happening. All these 'fun' presentations over, we were soon back to normal business with 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 debates and time to be given to their pet subjects. There was some concern voiced about the time given over at this group of meetings to the Shared Conversations, and the fact that business is piling up and yet we are not meeting, as we occasionally do, in November to do some 'catch up'. I am sure that this session does give people a chance to speak out, and that the Business Committee listens to the comments...but there are plenty of things Synod could do, but not really enough time! As always we then moved on to two new appointments to Archbishop's Council; a body which some Synod members feel is gathering real power and decision-making to itself at the cost of synodical governance.

As the afternoon continued Synod moved on to look at an interim report on the ongoing work on **Nurturing and Discerning Senior Leaders.** This was presented by Bishop Tim of Truro...one of those blessed people who looks very much younger than his age! This is still a controversial area for clergy, some of whom feel they or their colleagues will be side-lined if they don't fit in to a certain corporate way of being and doing! I think it goes both ways – we want the best our best for the church, but some more secular selection and management processes may not work in our context...and God may want leaders who don't necessarily fit the mould!

The evening meal break was spent with others including our former Bishop Paul as we discussed in some detail the implications for the church nationally and each diocese of the on-going **Goddard Enquiry** (as it was then!) into child sexual abuse and exploitation. It was very sobering to hear just how complex this is becoming, how much work is going in, and how much it is costing the Church of England to employ many extra legal and administrative staff to give the enquiry the information it demands. Many people at the meeting were of the opinion that it is too big and unwieldy to really be successful!

The final main session at Synod on Day 1 is always **Questions**, with a large range of issues being raised including plenty on the issues around human sexuality. Written replies are given in advance, and a few of the key people who answered were less than clear. 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 9th 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 **legislation** related to draft legislation on Mission and Pastoral issues, reform of legislative processes, Inspection of churches, and other things around clergy discipline, churchwardens, legal offices, and so on. All vitally important but less than riveting stuff! During this session I also managed to take Bishop Paul with me to welcome a group of **young observers** from our diocese, Leicester and Derby, and their youth advisers. I sat with them for a while in the public area and attempted to explain as best I could the legislation that we were discussing.

Lunchtime was spent with the other members of the **Criminal Justice group** (formerly the Penal Affairs group) (judges, other magistrates, probation staff, etc) where we looked at the role of faith groups in prisons and working with offenders. This was led by Dr Ruth Armstrong of Cambridge University, who was an exceptionally knowledgeable, passionate and engaging speaker. The group, led by the Bishop of Rochester, is small but has real value.

Afternoon session, and the airless hall was still very hot. It began with a further look at the **Renewal and Reform** work that continues to shape the future of the church and spending priorities. There was a long paper with lots of aspirations and visionary plans, but as always with the good old C of E, it won't move as quickly as we perhaps need! This was followed by a lively and encouraging debate on a recent report **A Church of England Vision for Education**. A good and lively debate was had about lots of success stories of church schools, although I still can't help thinking that if we devoted so much time, energy and money into the 90% of children and young people in England who do NOT attend church schools then we would make a more significant difference! It does seem that church schools are the easy option for mission to young people...although they only reach a little over 10%. Evening worship followed, which (unusually) used modern worship songs and had something of a sense of freedom about it. That really doesn't happen often at synod!

Evening meal consisted of a 'proper' meal instead of sandwiches and quiche! It was good to have some space and time, to sit with the young observers for a short time, and prepare for the final thrust of the business - **Annual Reports from the Archbishop's Council and the Church Commissioners**, with their usual presentation and questions. It is very difficult, as someone not great with accounts, to really drill down in -to the details of the budgets we vote on...yet those votes are for millions to be spent! After that, at 10pm, Synod was prorogued, as the next few days were spent doing something entirely different! I headed to get a drink and then to bed.

## **Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July – Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> July**

I was up early, as I had to drive down to Selston from York to preach at the kind invitation of the curate, Mina Munns, who is supported when she was a children's worker in our diocese. It was her first time presiding at communion, and a very special, vibrant and happy service was enjoyed by all! Then back in the car and to York for the start of the **Shared Conversations** at 2.30.

Every Diocese has had people engaged in the **Shared Conversations** process, as the issues around human sexuality become increasingly important within both church and society. The process members of synod followed (except the very few who opted out) was a condensed version of the Conversations, and included group discussions and Bible studies with colleagues, paired discussions, presentations from speakers, and stories from individuals and church leaders with a range of views. I found the whole process enjoyable, revealing and helpful despite the small and stuffy room my group was in most of the time. These Conversations took us from Sunday lunchtime until Tuesday lunchtime, with breaks for meals and a few gatherings of your diocese reps in the bar at night! It would be a breach of the protocols that we all agreed to for me to say anything about who said what, but it was a good experience for me.

During my 11 years on General Synod we have 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 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.