

Report from General Synod November 2015

General Synod this year began on Monday 23 and finished on Wednesday 2 November.

The Monday was given up to a training day for all the new members to learn about the procedures and methods of General Synod. The Archbishop of Canterbury was in attendance as he had never done an introduction day either. All our new members attended and found it a most useful occasion.

Synod began in earnest on Tuesday 24th November with a service at Westminster Abbey attended by the Queen. This, as always, was a wonderful occasion at which the preacher was Father Raniero Cantalamessa O.F.M the Preacher to the Papal Household and an excellent sermon on ecumenism was received by the synod as a whole¹.

After the service, which included a moving fanfare of trumpets as the Queen arrived, we all went to Church House for the Synod to be formally inaugurated. The Queen came and addressed us in her usual excellent way². It was a happy and uplifting occasion bearing in mind that she is the only monarch to have attended every one of the inaugurations of the church government during her reign.

Synod reconvened at 2.45pm for the proper work to commence. After the usual introduction, prayers and welcomes, we had the presidential address from the Archbishop of Canterbury. He used the metaphor of a plumb-line which had been found behind a wall recently renovated at Lambeth Palace. No one could tell how old this plumb-line was but it was very heavy and well formed. The Archbishop's message which referenced Amos's prophecy was that the plumb-line which the church is measured against is, of course, Jesus Christ himself. While the Archbishop told us about the central task of reform and renewal, it was also our duty to learn how to disagree well particularly in the area of sexuality³.

Our work began with the report of the Business Committee by Sue Booy's outlining the programme for the rest of the Synod. What captured most attention however was the new General Synod app which provides a great deal of information and enables synod members to work much more efficiently.

We welcomed the new Chaplain to Synod, Revd Michael Gisbourne, who led us in worship throughout the day and for the rest of the Synod.

We received a presentation on the reform and renewal agenda which focussed on three main areas – the use of financial resources; the changing of legislation to make it more efficient; and the development of discipleship. Lively questions ensued but the central point is that the subsidy which the dioceses of the Church of England receive every year of £42m will change as priority will be given to those with particularly poor areas and those who are initiating new sorts of ministry⁴.

This was followed by questions which had taken a new format. Questions are submitted and responded to in writing so Synod knows what is going on. Question time itself is now about the

¹ <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/11/rebuild-my-house-sermon-to-the-general-synod-of-the-church-of-england-by-father-raniero-cantalamessa.aspx>

² <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2015/11/the-queen-s-speech-at-the-inauguration-of-the-tenth-general-synod-of-the-church-of-england.aspx>

³ <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5493/archbishop-justins-presidential-address-to-the-general-synod>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2J0BBPe_6o

supplementary questions which the original questioner and one other can submit at that time. This means that the person providing the answer does not know what is coming next. This led to a lively and quite often good humoured discussion about various topics.

Synod finished at 7.00pm with worship and people went to various groups to learn more about how the General Synod is operating.

On the Wednesday morning, the loyal address to the Queen was circulated by the Archbishop of Canterbury which we voted unanimously to support.

The Archbishop of York gave a presentation on global warming and how it particularly affects the islands in the Pacific. If sea levels rise much more these islands will completely disappear. He also pointed out where poor management and the dumping of chemicals had completely ruined the environment of some of the islands so that they had become uninhabitable⁵.

We then had a long and stimulating debate about the migrant crisis, the point being that the motion was carried and it did contain a phrase about safeguarding the routes of migrants into the UK. As the Archbishop pointed out, this does mean that Synod was voting effectively for airstrikes against ISIS in order to prevent them from attacking refugees as they travelled. Synod did this by a significant majority.

Next we dealt with some legislative business which was to do with the ecclesiastical legal officer's fees. In simple terms the revision faculty rules means legal officers are now unable to collect many small fees they once had as they no longer exist. However some of the larger pieces of work they do now would attract a larger fee and this was agreed to.

This was followed by a very interesting presentation on public perceptions of Jesus which raised many interesting factors and the report GS Misc 1126 is one which many people should take up and read as it is both challenging and at the same time reassuring. It does seem that we have an equal number of committed Christians right across the age range but we haven't got a great deal of them in proportion to the population as a whole⁶.

In the afternoon there was the major debate on the report of Church Buildings Review Group which is on YouTube⁷. This report requires the six agencies responsible for buildings will be merged into one, to streamline efficiency and to make the use of our buildings more effective. During the course of this debate there was an excellent maiden speech by Tiffer Robinson which received a good response. Revd. Jonathan Ford did try to get a revision of the VAT laws, and resources for churches that are working in crucial areas but are not listed. His amendment failed although his speech was well received.

Synod drew to a close with farewells particularly to the outgoing General Secretary William Fittall who has served the General Synod for ten years. Synod was prorogued and will meet again in February.

After the Synod closed the House of Laity met separately to hear addresses from potential new leaders seeking their votes.

Jonathan Ford November 2015

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC3Q6o9vS3M>

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNPayyT_G2A

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHvTDGHH0to>