

General Synod: February 2008

Report from Tim Allen for the Loes and Woodbridge Deanery Synods

The February General Synod was shorter than usual (four days only) and a little thin on significant business – so I shall try to sum it up especially briefly and selectively. (Some would say that the essential business could have been confined to a one or two day session – with considerable saving of money.)

To my mind, the most significant feature was the great length and warmth of the standing ovation given by (almost) all to **Archbishop Rowan** when he arrived to open the Synod. Following the Archbishop's lecture 'Civil Rights and Religious Law in England', the Synod took place in the shadow of the hysterical media storm which was stimulated by journalists, and, to their shame, by a few of the current and retired leaders of the Anglican Church writing in the *News of the World* and elsewhere. From the warmth of this greeting to Archbishop Rowan and from talking to others at the Synod it seemed to me that almost everyone accepted, as Bishop Nigel said in response to the controversy, that 'some aspects of the reporting have been not only inaccurate but mischievous' and hoped, like Bishop Nigel, that Archbishop Rowan would continue to lead the Anglican Communion for many years to come. We should all pray for the Archbishop as he continues to bear the great burden placed upon him.

Otherwise, the Synod's most substantial business was **legislation** and within this the two most significant issues were proposals which were NOT approved. On **Clergy Terms of Service**, a vote by Houses threw out the clause which would have changed the traditional clergy freehold to enable parsonages to be vested in diocesan Parsonage Boards. Interestingly, the Bishops voted 14 (including both Archbishops) to 9 to retain the traditional freehold and the Clergy 100 to 57 to retain it, while the Laity were closely balanced at 84 to 79. On **Parochial Fees** there was much criticism of proposals for reform which would have led to standardisation (eg a uniform, national, flat-rate fee for all weddings with no provision for extras such as heating or verger/caretaker costs) and centralisation (eg a centralised system for 'booking' funerals with a diocesan office rather than directly with the parish priest). By a vote to adjourn (passed 135 to 110), the proposals were in effect sent back for further consideration and consultation. It would be good if our Diocese could find a way to consider collectively the proposals (some of which are worthwhile) and to make representations to the powers that be in

London. It is noteworthy that there is a common theme of resistance to undue centralisation in both these decisions.

There was an important debate on arrangements for **Crown Appointments** in the light of Gordon Brown's decision as Prime Minister to withdraw from involvement in senior church appointments. Many of us want to retain a role for a senior civil servant to continue to advise on appointments in much the same way as the Prime Minister's Appointments Secretary has hitherto done. It looks as if the Archbishops will probably be able to negotiate something useful with No 10.

Other key 'Church' topics debated included the **Anglican Communion Covenant** (latest draft somewhat improved but nothing definite decided yet); the **Anglo-Roman Catholic dialogue** (an agreed statement on doctrinal accord and areas where further work towards convergence is required); a call for an **additional Eucharistic Prayer** for use when a significant number of children are present (a draft will be produced); provision for dispensing with an **Anglican Eucharist** in certain LEP parishes even on days of obligation; and **access to Bibles in church**.

In addition, the Synod debated (usually in a well-informed and sometimes moving way) and approved several motions on wider, social topics – including **Detention of Terror Suspects without Charge, Mental Health** and **Casinos**.

Question Time revealed the latest '**Sheffield figures**' for each diocese (that is the number of stipendiary clergy employed as against its 'fair share' of the total number of clergy available in England as a whole). It showed that our diocese has proportionately fewer clergy relative to our 'fair share' than all but four of the 43 dioceses. We have 144, as against our 'fair share' of 155, that is 7.3% under share. We in Suffolk should think carefully why this is so and what it implies for the mission of our church – especially in multi-parish rural benefices.

Finally, clergy might like to consider the possibility of **standing for election** to General Synod, since Peter Townley's departure for the North leaves a vacancy to be filled in due course. I recommend it – despite General Synod's poor public image, membership can be a fascinating, satisfying and worthwhile role.

Tim Allen

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