

General Synod

Wednesday February 15th 2017

Presentation

Introduction by the Bishop of Willesden

I confess that I don't normally enjoy group work. In many a clergy study day or conference, the one thing guaranteed to send half our priests scuttling for cover has been that moment when the facilitator stands up and says "we're now going to divide you into groups"... It falls to me to try to help Synod with the questions of process that are around as we move to Group Work and then to debate the take note motion.

I need to go back a stage. I don't want to attempt an exercise in self-justification. I don't want to spend time in explanation. I don't want to make excuses for the House of Bishops' document. I do want to apologise to those members of Synod who found our report difficult, who didn't recognise themselves in it, who had expected more from us than we actually delivered, for the tone of the report. On behalf of the House, and without being trite or trivial, I'm sorry.

It might be helpful, as we seek to learn from the experience of this, to analyse one or two points that have been the subject of debate in the blogosphere and on social and mainstream media. The House and the College spent its own time over the autumn period in its own group work and shared conversations. The role of the Reflections Group was merely to steer the process and to help us come to a common mind. We haven't suppressed the diversity of understanding and the range of views that exist in the House and College. What we have tried to do is come to a common mind – an expression of where the House's thinking has got to.

It's a pretty conservative document, but is owned by the whole House and the vast majority of the College. So it would be wrong to suggest that this is a constipated exercise in maintaining a false unity among us.

One of the things that was formative in our deliberations was our experience of group work, using case studies not dissimilar from those which have been distributed to you for this afternoon. Those case studies helped us focus on the pastoral realities which are part of the life of bishops (and clergy) on a well-nigh weekly basis. They weren't a way of objectifying the flesh and blood lives of lesbian and gay members of our churches, nor were they a way of ignoring what had been encountered in the Shared Conversations in the Dioceses and the July Synod. In our deliberations, we had set ourselves a range of possibilities of ways forward for the Church, from a retrenchment to a more conservative pastoral approach, through to our existing situation, onwards into the provision of official liturgies and into the possibility of full acceptance of same sex marriage in the Church. The case studies helped us test the way in which our theological understanding, our instinctive pastoral responses, our calling to focus unity within the Church and our calling to be guardians of the faith inform the way in which we come to a proposal. As paragraph 1 of GS 2055 puts it, "addressing them involves fidelity to scripture, the proper understanding of how the Church's traditions shape its current discipleship, and the ways that changing approaches to human knowledge and reason inform or challenge the Christian faith as we have received it."

I guess we're inviting members of Synod to share that experience. I recognise that there are those who don't want to take part, because they have lost trust in the process. I regret that decision – as I said to others who took a similar decision at the July Synod – because being part of the process is always preferable to non-participation, and because we want every voice to be in the room and to be heard. The anonymised case studies are all based on real life situations, and help us explore what that phrase "interpreting the existing law and guidance

to permit maximum possible freedom within it” might look like. The Bishops have been tasked with chairing the groups – which at least means that those of us who are small group allergic have to turn up! It would be perfectly possible for a group to appoint another person to facilitate the group if preferred. Please come – participate – and contribute to the fullest possible feedback on the questions that are raised. All sorts of vulnerabilities are raised in this context. I need to remind you that the protocols remain in place and should be rigorously adhered to.

On to the debate on the Report itself. I do need to reiterate the factual position about what it means to “take note”. As I said at the launch of the Report “such a debate is on a neutral motion. It allows Synod to discuss the content and recommendations contained in the report, but a vote in favour of the motion does not commit the Synod to the acceptance of any matter in the report.” Of course, not taking note has become totemic for many members of Synod. If Synod declines to take note, the report in its present form cannot come back to us – though we will still have to find a way forward for the discussion. In the debate, the House will be listening hard, particularly for answers to the questions raised in paragraph 70 of the report. We will want members to address what we have put before you in all good faith, whether you like what we have said or not. It would be good if Synod agreed to take note. We’re not claiming that our Report is the last word. It’s a situation report. It represents where our thinking has got to. Taking note doesn’t commit you to our thinking.

A couple of final process questions. We need to recognise that behind this debate lie several major fault-lines. There is no shared understanding of theological positions between those who see themselves as upholding, from the point of view of scripture, an orthodox position and those who see themselves advocating, from the point of view of scripture, a position of change.

We lack a consensus on what we mean by “good disagreement” – is it about process or is it about outcomes? I think that many who want change believe that it’s possible, on the basis of good disagreement, to have pluriformity of practice in the Church. Others don’t believe that it’s possible to live in that way because of the canonical and legal constraints of uniformity that exist in our Church.

We will find this debate a continuing source of disagreement because we haven’t coalesced around an end point. When we legislated for women to be bishops, even those opposed came to the view that the Church of England had to make it possible for women to be bishops in the Church of God according to our canons and formularies. In this debate, we haven’t even begun to find a place where we can coalesce. The Bishops’ Report acknowledges a place of starting. More conversation is needed. We don’t yet know the next stage – nor yet when and whether we can bring any further report to Synod. Please make the fullest possible use of the groups and the debate to enable those deliberations.