

GENERAL SYNOD

BRADFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION:
NAME OF DIOCESES

Background Paper from the Diocese of Bradford

“That this Synod call on Archbishops’ Council to introduce legislation to enable dioceses of the Church of England to be named by reference either to a city or substantial town or to a geographical area.”

1. The purpose of this motion is to enable the naming of a diocese to describe in a recognisable manner the area to which the diocese relates. The motion does not look to change the name of any diocese and is not drawn up by specific reference to any particular diocese. This motion has been proposed by both Bradford and Ripon & Leeds Diocesan Synods.
2. The name of a diocesan See and the name of the associated diocese are the same, the diocese being named after the See. Legislation exists that enables the change of the name of a See (Section 11 Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007), and, with it, the name of the diocese.
3. In the process of the work of the Dioceses Commission regarding the Dioceses of Bradford, Ripon & Leeds and Wakefield, it became apparent that the new Diocese would not be adequately described by making reference to any particular city or substantial town. The new Diocese contains a number of cities and substantial towns which all have a unique nature.
4. The Dioceses Commission recommended that the new diocese be the Diocese of Leeds (also to be known as the Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales). The Commission presumably made this suggestion because it felt the “Diocese of Leeds” might not be sufficiently descriptive and might possibly be misleading as the Roman Catholic Diocese of Leeds already exists.
5. The Commission received legal advice from the Church House Legal Office that a diocesan See must be a city or a substantial town. This was based on the Canon Law of the Western Church as it has been applied in England, both before and since the Reformation. The Canonical position has its origins in a decision taken by the Council of Sardica in circa 343AD. Given the passage of time since c343AD it seems apparent that the context of the Church in England and of the nature of Church governance is overdue for review by this General Synod.
6. It is certainly the case that dioceses exist, in other parts of the world that are not named after either a city or a substantial town. In Scotland a number of medieval dioceses were named after the local thanedom e.g. Moray. In America, dioceses are often named after a state or part of a state *i.e.* Georgia or Southwestern Virginia. In Canada a recent decision

by their General Synod has created a new Diocese of Northern Ontario. It is also the case that dioceses exist in this country that are not named after a single local city or town, but rather are named after a combination of places, e.g. Ripon & Leeds, Southwell & Nottingham or Bath & Wells.

7. The Council of Sardica was apparently summoned by the Roman Emperors Constans and Constantius II in order to deal with some specific issues. There has been some argument down the ages about the dating of this Council which does suggest that the decisions were not thought to be particularly important at the time. The outcomes of the Council were recorded in both Latin and Greek but translations of the two languages do not always agree.
8. It appears that in 343AD there was a surfeit of bishops. They were being appointed in places where no appointment was reasonable. In response the Council decided:

“it is positively not permitted to ordain a bishop in a village or petty town, for which even one single presbyter is sufficient (for there is no necessity to ordain a bishop there) lest the name and authority of bishop be made of small account, but the bishops of the province ought to ordain bishops in those cities in which there were bishops previously; and if a city should be found with a population so large as to be worthy of an Episcopal see, let it receive one.” (Greek version).

or

“It is positively not permitted to ordain a bishop in a village or petty town, for which even one single presbyter is sufficient (for there is no necessity to ordain a bishop there) lest the name and authority of bishop should be made of small account, but the bishops of the province ought to ordain bishops in those cities in which there were bishops previously; and if a city should be found with a population so large as to be thought worthy of an Episcopal see, let it receive one.” (Latin version).

9. It appears that in England, Henry VIII followed the established canon law of the Western Church as to the location of sees with the changes that he made to bishoprics. It is apparent that the original concern of the Council of Sardica was to reduce the number of bishops and to avoid a situation where every parish might have had its own bishop, although the Canon Law had by the time of Archbishop Lanfranc come to be applied with a different aim in mind, namely ensuring that diocesan sees were established in prominent places. We are now in a different context from the situation in both c343AD and the time of Henry VIII. The decisions made at that time reflected common sense in the same way as common sense is now required.
10. In the twenty-first century we do not have a surfeit of bishops. We are reorganising dioceses in a way that will make them more efficient and reduce the number of diocesan bishops. This is coincidentally the outcome that was being sought in Sardica.
11. We are trying in the Church of England to find new ways to be Church. In West Yorkshire and the Dales, there will soon be one diocese to include Bradford, Ripon and Leeds and Wakefield, where previously each had its own diocesan bishop. It will also include various

other towns such as Barnsley, Dewsbury and Skipton that in 343AD would have been considered prominent towns. In other regions similar changes of name might also, in the future, be deemed appropriate.

12. It appears important that people can identify with the name of their diocese. In West Yorkshire the media has already demonstrated a preference to use the alternative description of West Yorkshire and the Dales. In a large diocese, far more people will be able to identify with a geographic description than with a city or town located a considerable distance away and with which they have no direct connection.

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9 October 2013

(with thanks to Ian Fletcher for his work in producing this paper)

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