

General Synod Report

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The General Synod of the Church of England began its July group of sessions this afternoon. As normal this meeting takes place in York University and unusually the weather was wet in contrast to the normal bright sunshine we enjoy.

To say that the Synod got off to a slow start was an understatement. It may have been the early start necessitated by the pressure of business that made people look bleary eyed, but I suspect that the dull business was the main cause.

The Synod begins with a few standard items such as welcomes and a report on the progress of statutory business (where things are in the parliamentary process). After this came the re-appointment of the Chairman of the Audit Committee and more significantly the appointment of the Church's senior mandarin, the Secretary General. The office becomes vacant following the move of Philip Mawer. His replacement is William Fittall currently Associate Political Director of the Northern Ireland Office. This is an important process. There have in the past been complaints that 'the men in grey suits' are running the Church of England. Whilst this is somewhat over the top it is nevertheless an influential position.

Also customary at the start of the Synod business is a report on the agenda by the business committee. This is normally an opportunity for people to lament the lack of certain items of business, or the presence of too much business, or the lateness of mailings. There is plenty of business this time which appears to be a waste of time and money but only the Anglican-Methodist Covenant was mentioned.

On the back of the debate on the agenda were two other matters of internal business. One concerns Synod questions, a very important part of the workings synod but a part of the business which people often have concerns about. On the table are some proposals to change the way questions are conducted whilst seeking to ensure that their usefulness is not dented. The other matter was the future dates of the Synod, for 2004 and 2005.

The final business before dinner was the start of what is likely to be a long debate on Synodical Government and in particular the composition of the General Synod. There are two competing pressures. On the one hand the desire to cut the costs of the Synod in view of the general financial pressure in parishes, dioceses and central bodies. On the other hand is the concern that cuts will damage the effectiveness and particularly the representative nature of the Synod. In November a motion was passed that ensured the size of the house of laity would not be cut. There now appear to be two motions on the table that will overturn this decision. In addition there are a whole string of proposals regarding how many Archdeacons etc. should be on the Synod. This is actually the second debate before any formal proposals have been drawn up. It will all get debated again when the actual proposals have been drafted. In fact it will get debated at least twice more. Which all goes to show that there are other ways to cut the costs of the Synod without damaging its representative nature - we can stop discussing all these ridiculous reports and all the motions to re-arrange the deckchairs whilst the ship sinks.

On the subject of wasted time and money the final business of the day was a report on 'regionalisation'. The Bishop of Durham introduced this and if there was ever anything exciting in regionalisation he managed to kill it off. The only interesting part of the initial presentation was to see how much steam was spouting from the ears of Sir Patrick Cormack (Tory MP) as he listened to the Bishop explain labour party policy.

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