

General Synod Report

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There was a fairly slow and unexciting start to General Synod business. In the customary debate on the report of the Business Committee it became evident that a number of people are becoming increasingly concerned about the stage management of Synod business. As someone who has complained about this in the past I can only agree. In a number of instances the Synod has previously passed motions, particularly Private Members Motions, to do something. However, because this does not fit in with current plans, things are not being done or else what is being done seems to be somehow different to what was originally agreed.

The report, Just Cause and Impediment was a good case in point. Five years ago the Synod agreed to look at Banns of marriage. The Synod managers decided that a wider review of marriage law was appropriate, not entirely unreasonable and in due course a review group was set up. However, instead of bringing definite proposals for debate in Synod we were treated to a presentation and a general debate. This will be followed in July by some definite proposals. This may sound well and good but it is problematic. First, the presentation seemed to add nothing new to what was in the report; the assumption is that members have not read material. Secondly, a presentation is inevitably slanted as against the final report of a review group. Thirdly, the Government is already looking at revision of the 1949 Marriage Act and many felt that the CofE was in danger of missing the boat in delaying decisions. Fourthly, someone now has to take the matter forward. Many people spoke following the debate - but only those people who got to speak. Someone, somewhere, will assess what they said, weigh up the apparent response, and then decide on some proposals to bring forward. It may be that these reflect fully what the review group has already proposes but people were left with the distinct impression that there is too much back-stage management.

The main proposals of Just Cause and Impediment have been reported in the press, but just to summarise: - A couple would be able to marry in any Church of England Church to which they could demonstrate a connection (residence, regular worshipper, parents, baptism, past worship etc). - They would approach the Minister who would determine if this was correct and issue a certificate stating that they are qualified to be married in that Church. - The couple would then approach the Civil Authorities in order to have the proposed marriage notified publicly (the Government are looking at using the Internet more, rather than just

putting up a notice in the Registry Office). - Banns would not be read, but a formal notice of the marriage could be read out in Church where this was deemed appropriate.

There are of course many other detailed proposals about venues, ecumenical issues, time of marriage etc.

During the course of business on Monday the Archbishop of Canterbury gave his Presidential Address. This was very upbeat and focussed on the gospel work of the Church. Archbishop George spoke of the priority of the gospel and gave many instances of churches that are flourishing and where bold outreach is taking place. The focus of the address was very good and there undoubtedly are good things going on, but the overall picture is far from good. The financial crisis facing parts of the Church of England will become apparent as the week goes on. Being at Synod always drives home just how far so many in the Church of England have drifted from our doctrinal home - the Thirty Nine Articles - and consequently from the teaching of Scripture. Some Dioceses are now cutting clergy posts, and Diocesan posts, in a draconian way. I am convinced that the root of the Church's problem is that we have drifted from the truth. In so many areas the Church is not being guided by God's word. No matter how much someone tries to talk up our health and vitality, until we face up to the fundamental disease afflicting us we will not be able to find a lasting cure.

The only other significant debate was on the Dates of Groups of Sessions. This resolution attracted no less than seven amendments all attempting to tweak the original proposal (except for one which effectively reversed it). The end result is that Synod will now meet in February and July with November being available as an option when necessary.

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