**General Synod\*: Diary #1 (November ‘21) Peter Barrett**

\*Synod means ‘walking together.’

Before I even ventured anywhere near Church House, I had to wade through mountains of paperwork for the business debates (plus loads of form filling). They have wonderful terminology which no one understands (‘Vacancy in See’ anyone?). Imagine getting emails every couple of days, with each one having 3-5 attachments, and each attachment being at least 6 pages long (some were over 40 pages).

Then there’s trying to find your way around Church House. It’s on at least five levels and makes Hampton Court maze look like a straight line. There is a tour on the first day, but there were so many other people wandering around – there are 487 people on General Synod (GS) – that I could not hear a word from the guide. The good news is that 60% of people were newbies like me (it’s normally around 40%), so I didn’t feel so bad. There’s a café that provides free tea and coffee – I made a beeline for that first!

The first day was for induction. They were sessions on Vision and Strategy (church growth) plus amusing mock debates to show how the process works (topic: this house believes that dogs, rather than cats, should be chosen as instruments of mission). You have to stand up to get the attention of the chair, who might pick you to speak. You can fill in a form (there’s a lot of that) and ask to speak on a particular debate but there’s no guarantee you’ll be chosen. It’s pretty random.

Before I arrived, I’d already gone through the agenda on a Zoom call with the Bishop of Oxford and all the other GS Oxford Diocese reps. (Oxford is one of the biggest areas: we had 19 reps, only beaten by London.) Plus one of them had set up a separate call to provide us with an individual perspective – very kind and very helpful. On top of that, I joined a WhatsApp group of new GS members linked to people from the Greenbelt arts festival, which I attend regularly. That made it easy to find people on the first day. (PS The staff there are brilliant. Nothing is too much trouble. I’m sure they must be angels.)

The next day was an inaugural service at Westminster Abbey. Pomp and circumstance – everyone wore their glad rags. I had a decent seat near the front for some reason and ended up getting communion from the Archbishop of Canterbury (ABC) himself! The afternoon consisted of the ABC giving an address (instantly forgettable – sorry), the Earl of Wessex turning up as a proxy for The Queen and a debate on how dioceses could give money to poorer dioceses. Naively, I thought anyone could do this as Oxford had already decided to give away £1 million to the five poorest dioceses over a period of 4 years. Apparently, we were the pioneer! Next up was question time. There are so many questions sent in advance that they never get through them all (we’re talking hundreds). I gave up at that point and retired to the tea room for some quiet – but you could still see the session on the screens there. It’s all a bit full on, very cerebral and there are no coffee breaks (seriously), so you just come in and out when you want.

The final day saw three decent debates on the growing gap between rich and poor (and how we can stop it), how the Church will grow in future (Vision and Strategy again) and recommendations to simplify the church structure.

There were also evening sessions on Living in Love and Faith at the very new Lambeth Palace library - great views from the top floor - plus I attended the Gender and Sexuality Group (it was packed, with over 130 people; five years ago, only 10 people attended).

Overall, there was a fair bit of humour – the ABC was very funny at times – and I was genuinely inspired by one or two individuals. This was a short Synod (one and a half days of business, excluding induction). The next one in February is 5 days long! I decided for this one I would sit back and watch and get to know people. Next time, I’m going to get up and speak. It was reassuring in the debates to find people asking the same questions I had in my head – at least I was on the same wavelength. It’s all pretty exhausting though. I will need to pace myself next time.

Slightly weird, fairly friendly, often funny, sometimes old-fashioned, occasionally inspiring, definitely exhausting – that was my first experience of Synod.