

Scottish Episcopal Church

Diocese of Argyll and the Isles

Diocesan Synod Wednesday 12th March 2014

A Diocesan Synod is the meeting in which, at least once a year, the Lay Representatives of each charge sit down with their Clergy to discuss with the Bishop the current state and future direction of the Church and to hold the Diocesan Management Committee (Diocesan Standing Committee) to account for its conduct of affairs. The Diocesan Synod of the Combined Diocese of Argyll and the Isles thus brings together people from the Western Isles, Skye, Mull and the Inner Hebrides, and the mainland from Lochaber to Kintyre, not forgetting the islands of the Clyde, Arran, Bute and Cumbrae. It is a fascinating group of people both lay and ordained, of all ages and backgrounds and is organised and supported by the Staff of the Diocesan Centre under the guidance of the Diocesan Secretary, Dr Peter Kemp. This year the meeting took place in the Argyll Gathering Halls, Oban, commencing with a Diocesan Eucharist in the Cathedral of St John the Divine on the evening of Tuesday 11th March 2014 and continuing business the following day. The meeting was preceded by a Diocesan Conference on 11th March on the theme of "Reflection for Action" on year 4 of Building the Vision, and was followed by a Clergy development day on Thursday 13th March. .

Much of the business of the Synod concerns the day to day issues of appointments to and reports from the various groups, at Diocesan and Provincial level, that maintain the activity of the Church in carrying out the mission and ministry of God's word at home and abroad. One important message from the Standing Committee was the importance of charges keeping key information, such as Quinquennial Reports on property, up to date. Over one quarter of these are now overdue while over half of all charge returns of basic statistics are still awaited, as is data on Vestry Training, electrical testing and Constitutions, some of which are known to date from the 19th Century. Without this vital information it is impossible for the Diocese to provide the basic support which charges need. There are three particular topics which merit further report and comment, however, these being the Bishop's Report,

the Treasurer's Report and the item for discussion in the afternoon session, the Church's attitude and response to issues around same-sex relationships.

The Bishop's Report was built around the three key themes of Mission, Ministry and Money and in each case he sought to explore where we have come from in the four years of his episcopacy, where we are now and where we are headed next.

Mission in the Diocese has been guided and developed, over this time, by the process of "Building the Vision". He noted how it had begun with an effort among the scattered charges of the Church to construct a real, not fantasy, vision of themselves and their communities, how we had battled the persistent cynicism of people who believed they had seen it all before and were determined "never to be disappointed again" and how, out of these negative attitudes had now grown the realisation that we have something positive to say, for we are the People of the Resurrection. He urged us to project this positive image to our communities and to show how, by our practice of worship and prayer in our daily lives, we were "being with God". His message was that by focussing on that, the money and people would follow. The next step was to prepare for the long haul, in the next year by developing the discipline of daily reflective practice which would nourish the soul and lay the foundations for our sustained growth in God.

On Ministry he outlined key recent appointments, emphasising the interest that the Diocese was now generating throughout the Anglican Communion. The Holy Spirit he believes is to be seen "hard at work" throughout the Diocese in the training and development of new ordinands and in the development of lay ministry, which will be celebrated in a special service in the Cathedral of St John on 7th June. The vacancy in Mid Argyll, after three years of development work, generated eight excellent applicants, from which a short list of four had produced not only a first class appointment in Father Simon MacKenzie, but also two other priests now working elsewhere in Scotland. This, he believes, demonstrates that the Diocese is helping to deliver renewed confidence in the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Introducing the themes that would be developed more fully by the Treasurer, the Bishop noted once again his belief that giving was the “sacrament of seriousness”. He urged charges to focus on the priority of God’s work, believing that the money would follow, rather than focussing at the start of every project on the money issues. Proof that this is working already, is to be seen in the way that the Diocese is moving away from dependency on Provincial aid, to a situation where the Diocesan lead on projects and plans is readily finding Provincial support.

Taking this forward, the Treasurer noted the practical ways in which Diocesan action was furthering God’s work, from the use of last year’s Lent Appeal to fund the secondary education of two schoolgirls in Malawi and Tanzania, to the success of the Diocese in attracting Provincial support for specific developments such as funding visitors to support Building the Vision, the work of our full time Development Officer, Allison Clark, Pastoral Visitor Training, and the Living the Vision project in Skye, which now holds out the tantalising prospect of being able to sustain a full time priest once again on the island. Argyll and the Isles now attracts just over a quarter of all the Scottish Grants for Ministry, reflecting the importance attached by the Province to the work of the Diocese. At the same time we spend around two thirds of our budget on Mission and Ministry within the Diocese. The key message is that the quota should be viewed as an investment, not a tax on charges, since, for every £1 of quota levied, charges receive back £1.50 in support from the Diocese. A further piece of good news is that, while quota increases have recently been steep, the rate of rise is expected to fall slightly in the next few years. Island Retreats Ltd, the Company which runs our two retreat houses in Iona and Cumbrae has had a poor year but has still managed, as predicted, to return £20,000 to the Diocese in Rent and Loan Repayment.

In the afternoon the Synod took the first steps in the process that the church has put in place to explore issues around same sex relationships in the light of the Marriage and Civil Partnerships Bill (Scotland). This passed its final hurdle in the Scottish Parliament on 4th February 2014 and, subject to Royal Assent, is expected to be enacted later this year. This process, which is being guided by a special committee of the General Synod, will go through a number of stages this year before, if

necessary, bringing forward proposals for changes to our Canons at a future date. Informed by a paper from our Primus, the Diocesan Synod was asked to consider what issues this process should take into account and what areas of agreement and of disagreement could be identified even now, as well as trying to capture basic attitudes to the issues and expected outcomes from the process. From this brief discussion at Synod it is possible at this early stage to discern only some very basic outlines of the way the debate will go. On the one hand there was a very clear and positive welcome for the Bill. Many at the Synod want to do more to demonstrate that we recognise the need for equality for those among us who find that, made in the image of God as we all are, they can only fully experience the joy of sexual fulfilment and the support of a lifelong bond through a same sex relationship. Concern was expressed that we should fully explore all the consequences intended and unintended, including the effects on children and families, but a significant group at the Synod felt that the church, guided in this unknown territory by the Holy Spirit, should take a positive and supportive attitude to this legislation and to implementing it in our practice. There was on the other hand, not surprisingly, a very strong opposition to this view which was clearly an expression of deeply held beliefs among deeply reflective colleagues, many of whose attitudes were underpinned by close attention to scriptural guidance. The good thing about the process is that, since it is a characteristic and joy of our church that we can somehow accommodate very wide polarities of opinion and sustain vigorous debate on many issues without rancour, the end of the session saw all joining in the blessing with equal enthusiasm and in the clear expectation of further lively discussion and debate in the months to come. This is an issue on which we all have opinions and a debate in which I hope that you will all join.

The General Synod will meet in Edinburgh on 12th – 14th June 2014 and the Diocesan Synod will reconvene on the 10th March next year.

Dr E M Armstrong

Lay Representative, St John's Cathedral, Oban. .