

Peterborough Diocesan Synod 7 September 2013
Presidential Address

I have been informed that I am to be admitted to the House of Lords later this year. The date is yet to be decided, but is likely to be late November or early December. There are all sorts of arguments for and against having bishops in the second chamber of Parliament. I don't want to get into those arguments today, though I see this as an element of our evolving national constitution which has far more in its favour than against it. If the Church is to be involved in society and community, preaching and living the kingdom, then surely its leaders must take every opportunity offered to them to be present, to speak, and to influence opinion and events, whenever they can. But I am aware of real concerns among church people: some saying that this role takes the bishop away from the diocese too much, others complaining that there aren't enough bishops present for certain key debates and votes. I am well aware of those views and tensions. I would like to explain how I see this role, how I intend to fulfil it, and what specific duties I will have; and to dispel a misconception.

These days the bishops in the House of Lords are seen as representing all faith communities, and indeed the wider community of their diocese. They are the only members of the house representing a geographical area, and although only 26 bishops are there out of 42 dioceses, there is still good national coverage. Earlier this week I was at a meeting with Imams and Mosque Chairmen in Peterborough: they rejoice in my appointment to the House of Lords and see me as representing them as well as Christians. I know too that County and City Councillors also understand that I can be a spokesman for the people of Northants and Peterborough and Rutland regardless of their faith commitment.

There are some peers for whom this is in effect a full-time job, and others including the bishops whose other responsibilities mean that they are part-time. That is understood, and in practice there are never more than a dozen bishops present, more normally between two and six in the chamber when the House is sitting. I understand that the House normally sits from 2.30pm until about 10.00pm, Mondays to Thursdays during term time. Committees and other meetings happen in the mornings. Friday sessions are rare, and the holidays are quite long, although as we have seen recently Parliament can be recalled even in August. The House of Lords did debate Syria on the same day as the House of Commons, but chose not to vote on it.

Three weeks a year, two of them in term time and one in recess, I will be on duty. That means being there all week Monday-Thursday and ready to speak on any matters that come up, or in the recess being available for any recall. Most other weeks during term-time I will intend to be there one day a week, normally Tuesday for a variety of reasons. In practice looking at next year's diary that means about 26 days, an average of one day a fortnight. Because of good trains to London from Peterborough I will aim to be able to get there for an occasional evening in addition to this if the topic of debate seems to justify that or if I think that my vote needs to be counted.

I am making a few changes in the way I work here to enable this to happen. In particular I will be very reluctant to commit myself to midweek evening services during term time. I don't want to disappoint a parish if we're summoned for a vote. In fact over the last year or two we have moved most confirmations and a number of institutions and licensing services to the

weekends. Saturday and Sunday afternoons make good sense for welcoming new clergy to parishes, and confirming people in their home parish on a Sunday morning, or in the Cathedral or the deanery on a Saturday evening, is also very good. So in order to be able to keep more evenings free to be able to get to London when necessary I shall be doing rather more at weekends. I will not give up my usual practice of spending Wednesdays based at Bouverie Court or Thursdays in Peterborough, and I will not drop or reduce my commitment to visit all clergy in their homes every three years. Neither will I give up my day off which is almost always on a Friday: clergy please take note that your Bishop thinks days off are important! Bishop John has been in post for over two years now, and is well able to act for me in the diocese when necessary in an emergency if I am on House of Lords duty.

In recent years bishops have been encouraged to hold portfolios, areas of special interest where they will develop some expertise to speak on the Church's behalf. I am glad to say that I have been allocated my two first choices: prisons and criminal justice, and farming and rural affairs. I am not an expert on either, but I know a fair amount and care deeply about both. Each portfolio is covered by two or three bishops, to make it as easy as possible to ensure that at least one specialist is present whenever a particular subject is discussed.

Just to deal with a common misconception: entering the House of Lords does not make me a Lord Bishop. Technically that term applies already, although I in common with many other bishops discourage its use and don't print it on letterheads or elsewhere. The days of addressing bishops as "My Lord" should be well behind us. For strictly formal use Bishop is enough. That's what the Queen calls me! Less formally those who wish to use a title should observe the modern (and ancient) usage of Bishop Donald.

Obviously I am entering the House of Lords after the Syria debate, but I am happy to put on record that had I been entitled to attend, and had the House of Lords voted, I would have opposed a military strike. I deplore the use of gas, particularly against civilians, but war crimes should be prosecuted in the appropriate international courts. Military action other than in self-defence requires: international agreement, very clear and measurable objectives, and a detailed plan for what will follow. I didn't hear any of those articulated before the debate.

Today is Christine Allsopp's last time at this Synod. There will be other occasions to bid her farewell from the Diocese, but I want to thank her and Dennis today for their contributions to our Church's synodical life. Yesterday I and a panel of clergy and laity, men and women, interviewed candidates for Christine's successor as Archdeacon of Northampton. I am glad to report that we were unanimous and enthusiastic in our choice, and that the individual concerned has accepted my offer of the post. I hope to be able to announce the name before the end of this month, and expect that the new Archdeacon will start work early next year. During the vacancy, Archdeacon Gordon will perform the legal duties of the Archdeacon of Northampton, and Bishop John will cover the pastoral duties and be responsible for any appointments to parishes.

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