

## **Shared Conversations – a few reflections**

I attended the Shared Conversations in early October – the preparatory reading was interesting and perhaps telling, four short essays:

1. A theological explanation of a conservative viewpoint
2. A theological explanation of a revisionist viewpoint
3. An essay explaining the process and outcome in the Church of Scotland
4. An essay explaining divisions and conflict resolution in the early church.

I found these helpful, but the last two I felt made a statement about the direction of travel and preferred outcome – a direction that I am not convinced is the right way forwards.

The shared conversations took place in a comfortable hotel in the middle of nowhere! The welcome was warm and the facilitators determined (and proficient) at making the experience a 'safe place'. I quickly became aware that the group was by no means representative of the church (the rules governing who was picked ensured that) – to be clear those of us believing we need to stand by the traditional teaching of the church were in a minority. I hadn't met anyone from the group before, but everyone was friendly.

Having taken part in the General Synod shared conversations around women bishops I was less apprehensive about attending than I might have been. However one major difference this time was that the facilitators had no advance information of participants theological view and so unlike the GS conversations they were unable to balance groups to ensure a breadth of views, I found myself in one statistically unlikely group where 4/6 of us had a similar orthodox view.

The group work started out slowly.. discussing more neutral topics and gradually increased in intensity – the second day was the crucial part with all day spent in discussion with 9 people (plus facilitator) and some of it in groups of three. These discussions nearly got to the crux of the issues, but the very 'safeness' and set up of the groups meant that on reflection maybe 10% of the issues were left unsaid...5% at each end of the spectrum. Perhaps most shocking was that there was no direct engagement with scripture. Yes there was discussion about scripture but no examination it together. This appeared to be a deliberate part of the process – and to me a serious omission.

Overall I came away-

- Tired but less so than I expected
- Having enjoyed relating to the other participants
- Having gained a greater understanding of the views of those who think differently to me
- Pleased I went and felt I had been able to share my views.
- Pessimistic about the long term outcome... thinking Church of Scotland fudge is the most likely outcome – and one that will lead to division.

My advice if you are about to attend - ask your church family to PRAY!!

Chris Fry