



mallards perched on the wall, looking out over the dawn fields towards the

As I approached, they stood to attention, and I enjoyed the delicious metaphor for our theological consultation on cathedral governance: getting our ducks in a row. We met for 24 hours; 13 deans, 6 theologians, 2 bishops and 1 Third Church Estates Commissioner, supported by our cathedrals staff from across the NCIs. The [Cathedrals Working Group report](#) came before General Synod last July, amidst criticism that its theology was not capacious enough to describe such a complex set of institutions, with myriad roles and stakeholders.

We met to put that right: the deans selected by their peers, joined by leading theologians, to think together about what good governance looks like in a cathedral context. We considered a variety of papers from a range of contributors, and of our 6 theologians, 4 were cathedral canons, so they brought us that insight too. We are busy writing up our conversation so we can share it more widely. Meanwhile, what struck me about our conversation was how very practical theology can be. Because we laid the groundwork at some length in the first part of our consultation, when we came to looking with fresh eyes at those CWG report recommendations that have proved most disputed, we were able to resolve them at speed. Too often, "more theology" is really a request for a delay, but in our consultation it actually speeded things up.

For instance, we spent some time considering the 'community-held' flavour of a cathedral. All sorts of people feel a sense of ownership of 'their' cathedral. Perhaps communities used to feel this about their parish church, and many still do, but the easy way in which people who might not broach a church door breeze into their cathedral suggests that any governance structure that is too 'churchy' cannot represent them. This swiftly led us to agree that the proposed dual regulation by both the Church Commissioners and the Charity Commission was the perfect way to reflect this complexity. Because the public have a genuine stake, they should quite reasonably expect cathedrals to exemplify excellence in secular best practice, just as they embody excellence in church practices of various kinds, be it music, liturgy, architecture or anything else. And maybe, as we have learned through safeguarding, the very policies that at first blush look bureaucratic might in fact be conduits of grace?

The discussion on regulation shaded into a discussion about accountability, where it also became clear that the Cathedral Council must be the vital mechanism to bring together these various stakeholders, to support the Cathedral Chapter in its more formal governance role. But this was nuanced. Our conversation included a debate about the impossibility of even the best governance structure being able to work in a context where relationships have broken down and trust has gone. It is all too easy to slap law onto recalcitrance, but covenant is better than contract, because everyone needs to work at it. So a Council that is non-statutory would have that vital freedom, to negotiate its particular relationship with the cathedral in its locality, with its particular set of gifts and opportunities.

Theology helped us too with the idea of inspection. If cathedrals aim to be truly excellent, why would they want to wait for 5 years to learn how to improve, and why would they not wait the whole their life to be scrutinised not just the financial bits? There was therefore strong support for the more frequent, comprehensive and on-going inspections that are already being piloted through peer reviews. With the right processes and training, these could become the vehicle for spreading the best practice guidance that will underpin the new Cathedrals Measure, as well as providing a catalyst to speed up learning between cathedrals and to develop cultures of continuous improvement.

We ranged far and wide, identifying recommendations both great and small. One was that all new bishops should serve in residence in their cathedral for a week, so they can experience at first hand the rhythm of life there, given that the cathedral is the seat of the bishop. Another was the important reminder that Administration is one of the gifts of the spirit. Perhaps we ought to baptise this job title rather than consign it to the

history books, in order to recognise the vocational nature of this gifting?

One key insight though was that we will never resolve some of the tensions that are identified in the CWG report. Nor is it necessary to do so, because it is in the wrestling that we will learn new ways of relating to each other: a neat but wrong solution might well be worse than the inconvenience of uncertainty. In this insight we were inspired by the tension inherent and unresolved most fruitfully in the Trinity, as a model of holding everything faithfully in relationship without the need to tidy things up.

I left Windsor daunted but encouraged by the great calling our cathedrals have to serve the bishop and the diocese, the parishes and the nation, and the opportunity the CWG report represents. It calls the cathedrals to consider again what being the first church of the diocese means in this generation, through the lens of all 5 Marks of Mission, and particularly for those whose only experience of church is when they come to visit their cathedral.

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