

Exactly one hundred years ago in 1919 Parliament was debating a National Assembly of the Church of England (Powers) Bill. Speaking in support of the Bill in the House of Lords, Lord Parmoor said,

If this Bill is passed, for the first time the laity of the Church will have a recognised and substantive position in the corporate expression of church life ...

The very object of the Bill is to give an effective part to a large number of Churchmen, earnest and eager to do their best for the Church and who cannot have an effective influence at the present time. That is why I, as a layman, have laboured for this Bill.

The Bill was passed and became the Church of England Assembly (Powers) Act 1919. It devolved legislative power from Parliament to the Church Assembly – which has since become the General Synod.

The Constitution of the Church Assembly included Rules for the Representation of the Laity. It was as a result of those Rules that the laity obtained the ‘recognised and substantive position in the corporate expression of church life’ referred to by Lord Parmoor. The non-gender inclusive language of that time hides the fact that churchwomen as well as churchmen were members of the House of Laity of the Church Assembly, PCCs and the other new tiers of Church governance from the beginning.

The Rules for the Representation of the Laity included things that church people today would find familiar: annual parochial church meetings, electoral rolls, elections to PCCs and various forms that were to be used. The Rules for the Representation of the Laity were replaced in 1969 with the Church Representation Rules and the 1969 Rules, with numerous amendments, have been in force since that time. The Church has changed in a number of ways over the past 50 years and the time has come to replace the Rules once again.

The new Church Representation Rules emerged from the work of a Simplification Task Group established by the Archbishops’ Council. The task group’s role was to bring forward proposals to remove constraints to the mission and growth of the Church of England that result from existing legislation and processes.

The task group recommended that there were three major ways in which the Church Representation Rules should be reformed. First, they needed to be made less burdensome to the clergy and laity in the parishes who have to operate them. Unnecessary provisions needed to be identified and removed; and other provisions needed to be streamlined. Secondly, parishes should be given much greater flexibility over their constitutional arrangements so that they could operate in the way that was most effective for the mission, life and work of the local church. Thirdly, the administrative burdens for those involved in running multi-parish benefices – especially in the rural context where the number of parishes in a benefice can be considerable – needed to be radically reduced.

Although the new Rules entirely replace the old Rules, many of the concepts remain familiar. The Rules continue to provide for church electoral rolls, annual meetings, PCCs, deanery synods and diocesan synods, and the House of Laity of the General Synod. But there are significant changes to the way in which the Rules are presented and to their substance.

The new Rules have been completely redrafted and are a great deal easier to understand. They are no longer characterised by over-long sentences; provisions are broken down into more easily digestible parts. Secondly, all the provisions relating to parish governance are now in a self-contained Part of the Rules (Part 9). This should make navigation around the Rules easier.

In terms of substance, one of the most significant reforms is provided for in Part 2 of the new Rules. The default position is that the model Rules for parish governance set out in Part 9 apply to each parish. But the annual meeting of any parish can make a scheme to amend, supplement or replace the model rules. This will make it possible for a parish to make governance arrangements that are best suited to the mission and life of the Church in that parish. A small number of essential provisions will be mandatory; and a scheme making Rules for a parish will have to be approved by the bishop's council who must be satisfied, among other things, that the scheme makes due provision for the representation of the laity, and that it ensures the effective governance of the parish.

Another major reform is the provision for joint councils in Section C of Part 9. Under the new Rules, joint councils can replace the individual PCCs. Where that happens the number of local bodies – and the number of meetings – will be reduced, in some cases very significantly, and should result in a significant reduction in the administrative burdens imposed on clergy and laity.

In addition, various provisions of the current Rules that were thought to be unnecessary or unduly burdensome have been pruned away, anomalies have been addressed, and doubts as to meaning have been removed. The Rules are designed to be compliant with recent data protection legislation; they provide for electronic communication, for better representation of mission initiatives in the Church's structures; they enable PCCs to do business by correspondence; and they provide that lay people must form a majority of a PCC.

Basic outline of the new Rules

- **Part 1** (church electoral roll) makes provision for the compilation and revision of church electoral rolls.
- **Part 2** (parish governance) provides for the model Rules in Part 9 to apply to each parish. But that is subject to the other provisions of Part 2 which enable a parish to make a scheme to amend or supplement, or to replace, the model Rules under the procedure set out in that Part.
- **Part 3** (deanery synods) makes provision for the composition of, and elections to, deanery synods.
- **Part 4** (diocesan synods) makes provision for the composition of, and elections to, diocesan synods.
- **Part 5** (House of Laity of the General Synod) makes provision for the membership of, and elections to, the House of Laity.
- **Part 6** (appeals) makes provision for appeals against decisions relating to enrolment on a church electoral roll and elections.
- **Part 7** (disqualification etc.) makes provision for persons to be disqualified from serving as a member of synodical bodies and for the vacation of a member's seat on such a body in specified circumstances.
- **Part 8** (miscellaneous) makes miscellaneous provisions for the purposes of the Rules, including provisions relating to the handling of personal data, casual vacancies, communication by email or post and interpretation.

- **Part 9** (parish governance: model Rules) contains the model Rules for parish governance. These provide for matters such as annual and other parochial church meetings, elections of members of parochial PCCs and deanery synods, the composition and business of PCCs, and the making of schemes for joint councils for 'connected parishes'. The model Rules will apply automatically unless a parish makes a scheme under [Rule 12](#) to amend or supplement, or to replace, the model Rules.
- **Part 10** (forms) contains the forms which are required to be used for the purposes of the Rules.
- **Part 11** (index) contains an index of defined terms for the purposes of the Rules.

Summary of main features of the new Rules

The new Church Representation Rules implement a range of reforms. These include the elimination of various procedural requirements relating to parish governance, the provision of a separate Part of the Rules for model Rules relating to parish governance, provision enabling parishes to make their own Rules (with the agreement of the bishop's council), provision enabling connected parishes to establish joint councils in place of their separate PCCs, and updating the forms. The principal reforms are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Revision of church electoral roll and preparation of new roll

The provisions relating to the revision of church electoral rolls and the preparation of new rolls in **Part 1** have been simplified. Names no longer need to be removed from the roll during the course of the year; they only need to be added: see [Rule 2](#). Names are still removed, as appropriate, at the annual revision: see [Rule 4](#). Provision has been made to avoid a person's name incorrectly being removed from a roll: see [Rule 4\(8\)](#).

Rolls may be published electronically instead of in paper form. The roll as published must include every name entered on the roll but not other personal data (e.g. addresses). see **Rule 5**.

Annual meeting

The annual parochial church meeting must now be held between 1 January and 31 May (rather than 30 April): see [Rule M1](#).

The annual meeting no longer appoints sidesmen; they are now appointed by the PCC: see [Rule M6\(6\)](#).

A person who is elected in 2020 or subsequently to serve as a lay member of a deanery synod is limited to two successive terms of office. Having served two successive terms, the person is ineligible for election for the next three-year term before becoming eligible again. But the annual meeting may pass a resolution disapplying the limit on the number of terms which may be served by lay members elected by the parish to the deanery synod. The term limit does not apply to any term of office which began before 2020 and will therefore not become material until the deanery synod elections in 2026. see [Rule M8\(5\) to \(7\)](#).

Parochial church councils – ensuring lay majority

Lay members of a PCC cannot be outnumbered by clerical members: see [Rule M15\(2\)](#). A meeting of the PCC is quorate only if the majority of members present are lay: see [Rule M27\(2\)](#).

Parochial church councils – meetings

The Rules no longer specify a minimum number of PCC meetings which must be held each year. Instead, the PCC is required to hold a sufficient number of meetings to enable the efficient transaction of its business: see [Rule M23\(1\)](#).

The Rules now expressly state who is entitled to attend a PCC meeting. A PCC may invite other persons to attend its meetings as it wishes. see [Rule M24](#).

Parochial church councils – conduct of business by correspondence

Provision is now made in the Rules to enable PCCs to conduct business by correspondence (whether on paper or by email) where the chair of the PCC decides that particular business can properly be conducted in that way: see [Rule M29](#).

Joint councils

The Rules enable the annual meetings of ‘connected parishes’ to make schemes establishing a joint council: see [Section C](#) of Part 9. Parishes are ‘connected’ if they belong to the same benefice, if they belong to benefices held in plurality or if they are in the area of the same group ministry. A scheme establishing a joint council can transfer all the property, rights, liabilities and functions of the individual PCCs to the joint council. If a scheme does that, the individual PCCs go into abeyance and no separate PCC meetings are held: the joint council does everything. Alternatively, a scheme establishing a joint council may transfer only certain property, rights, liabilities and functions – as specified in the scheme – of the individual PCCs to the joint council. If a scheme does that, the individual PCCs continue to function alongside the joint council, with the joint council exercising only the functions that are transferred to it and the other functions remaining with the individual PCCs.

Mission initiatives

The Rules now make mandatory provision for the representation of mission initiatives (i.e. initiatives that are established by bishops' mission orders) on deanery synods where the bishop so directs: see [Rule 24](#). They also provide for persons who worship in mission initiatives to be eligible for election to diocesan synods and the General Synod: see [Rule 36](#) and [Rule 50](#).

The new Rules provide for the number of habitual worshippers in mission initiatives to be taken into account – together with the numbers of parish electoral rolls – when apportioning the seats in the General Synod's House of Laity between the dioceses: see [Rule 49](#).

House of Laity of the General Synod

The apportionment of the number of members of the House of Laity between the provinces of Canterbury and York is no longer required to be 70:30 if the General Synod passes a resolution specifying some other proportion.

Electronic communication

The Rules now make comprehensive provision for the use of communication by email: see [Rule 76](#). Providing an email address is optional; but if one is provided, any communication under the Rules may be sent to that email address. An email will satisfy any requirements in the Rules for a communication to be in writing. Where in the past there was an obligation to pass on addresses (e.g. by the PCC secretary to the secretary of the deanery synod), any email address given by a person must also be passed on.

Electronic voting in elections

The Rules now facilitate the use of electronic voting methods in elections to diocesan synods and to the General Synod: see [Rule 42\(5\)](#) and [Rule 56](#).

Data protection

The Rules take account of recent changes to the law contained in the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. The Rules have been designed to avoid any need to obtain consent from individuals for processing their personal data for the purposes of the Rules. Instead, personal data can be processed in the ways required by the Rules on the basis (i) that doing so 'is necessary for compliance with a legal obligation' (as the Rules have the force of law); and (ii) so far as data includes 'special category personal data' because it reveals a person's religious beliefs, that the processing is carried out internally in the course of the Church of England's legitimate activities. Personal data contained in the published version of the electoral roll is data which 'is manifestly made public by the data subject' when he or she applies to have his or her name included on the roll and is covered on that basis.

A person who holds personal data for the purposes of the Rules must ensure that the data is held securely: see [Rule 72](#).

Further information and guidance about data protection for parishes is available on the Parish Resources website.

Notes to accompany the new Rules

Some editorial footnotes have been included in this edition of the Rules. These do not form part of the legal text of the Rules but are there to assist the reader in navigating and using the Rules.

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