

The Church of England is looking at options including a possible change in the law to enable the General Synod to meet remotely, in response to the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic.

In a letter to all members of Synod today, the officers of Synod confirm that they have used their legal powers to cancel the planned residential meeting due to take place York in July in light of the current restrictions.

However, they set out proposals for members of Synod to meet informally and remotely, potentially in a similar way to the current sittings of Parliament, as well as details of an extension to the term of the current Synod by a year.

Under the current rules, Synod can only pass legislation and transact key business by meeting in person.

In their letter, the officers – the Archbishops, Prolocutors of Canterbury and York of the House of Clergy, and the Chair and Vice-Chair of the House of Laity – say they wish to explore with the Government the possibility of Parliament passing legislation to enable the Synod to transact its business remotely if it is not possible to meet in person.

If it is not possible to do this in time to arrange a remote sitting in July, they suggest an informal remote meeting of Synod members in July when, although they could not pass legislation or take other decisions, could discuss urgent matters and carry out scrutiny.

Separately, Parliament has already approved a provision in the Coronavirus Act 2020 enabling the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to request an order postponing the elections to General Synod due to take place this summer.

A request to postpone the elections for a year is due to be considered by the Privy Council shortly. It would enable the current Synod to meet in November. If it were still not possible to meet physically by then, it is hoped that Parliament will have passed legislation so that an official sitting of the Synod by “virtual” means would be possible.

Synod members are to be surveyed to gauge support for the idea.

Canon Dr Jamie Harrison, Chair of the House of Laity, said: “The residential York Synod is a time to renew friendships and debate important matters; cancelling it has been a hard, but necessary, decision.

“We must now find ways, together, to ensure that the Synod’s vital work of engaging with legislation and scrutiny can continue.”

The Revd Canon Chris Newlands, Prolocutor of the Convocation of York, said: “The decision to cancel the physical gathering of General Synod was taken only after much prayer and reflection, conscious that we need to listen to the mind of the whole Synod more than ever at this time, though we are constrained by the measures currently in force nationally and the legal requirements that have to be met for a meeting of Synod.

“We very much hope that when we are able to gather physically once again, we will together seek to discern how God is calling us to be His Church in England in the ‘new normal’ of life after the coronavirus pandemic.”

The Revd Canon Sue Booy, Chair of Synod’s Business Committee, said: “It is obviously right in our current circumstances to take steps to minimise risk to Synod members and those who would serve them in York by cancelling the formal sessions in July.

“The Business Committee is ready to fulfil our role in finding ways to generate and enable discussion about issues of importance as well as to explore and make arrangements for a future formally constituted group of sessions.

“We will be working with others to enable the legal framework we need to allow our business to proceed properly and give Synod members the opportunity to scrutinise and comment on business.”

Notes to editors

The [full letter can be read online](#).

The Officers of the General Synod are:

- The Presidents - the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu;
- Prolocutor of the Convocation of Canterbury, the Revd Canon Simon Butler
- Prolocutor of the Convocation of York, the Revd Canon Chris Newlands;
- Chair of the House of Laity, Canon Dr Jamie Harrison
- Vice Chair of the House of Laity, Canon Elizabeth Paver

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