

The Church of England – a background note

Identity

1. *“The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith Churches called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.”*
2. This extract from the Preface to the Declaration of Assent, which all clergy make both at their ordination and when taking up a new appointment, summarises the Church of England’s self-understanding, namely as part of the universal Christian Church committed to the task committed to the first apostles by Jesus Christ to go into all nations and make disciples.

History

3. The Church of England traces its history back to the earliest days of Christianity in this island and to the subsequent re-founding of the church following the arrival of St Augustine of Canterbury in 597AD. Since the nineteenth century Anglicanism has come to be a term to describe a particular family within worldwide Christianity. The origin of the word “Anglican” was, however, geographical rather than theological. The first commitment in Magna Carta in 1215 was that the “*ecclesia anglicana*”-that is the English Church – should be free.
4. The Reformation led to major changes in the governance of the Church of England and to its worship and doctrine. Much else remained unchanged. The threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon was retained. The parochial system and the cathedrals continued. The role of bishop as chief pastor for each diocese was preserved. There continued to be two provinces of Canterbury and York each under their archbishop. Much of the pre- Reformation canon law remained in force. Diocesan bishops continued to sit in the House of Lords. Even today, half of the Church of England’s nearly 16,000 parish churches were built before the Reformation.
5. The Church of England sees itself as both Catholic and Reformed. It remains the established church in England with the Queen as Supreme Governor and, as at the Reformation, 26 bishops as Lords Spiritual. Ecclesiastical law is part of the law of the land. Parish clergy continue to have certain duties in respect of everyone who lives in their parish, whatever their religious conviction. So, for example, a man and a woman can marry in the church of the parish where they live or in another parish church with which they have a qualifying connection so long as they are prepared to be married in a Christian act of worship.
6. The Church of England is one of the 38 member churches of the Anglican Communion. These include the Church in Wales, the Church of Ireland and the Episcopal Church of Scotland.

Key Facts

7. The Church of England seeks to maintain a Christian presence in every community through its buildings and worshipping communities. There are 12,557 parishes, many of them, especially in rural areas, organised into multi parish benefices (a ‘benefice’ is the office held by an incumbent- normally a rector or vicar). The number of benefices is currently 7,410.

8. There are currently 15,712 open Church of England churches in parishes (this excludes college and other chapels). Just over a quarter are grade 1 listed and another half either grade 2* or grade 2 listed. The Church of England is responsible for around 45% of the grade 1 listed buildings of England. Some of its cathedrals and Westminster Abbey are among the nation's buildings most visited by tourists.
9. There are just over 8,200 full time, paid Anglican clergy in dioceses and a further 1,500 in paid chaplaincy (primarily in hospitals, prisons, armed forces and education). This number is supplemented by 3,100 licensed unpaid clergy. Around 5,700 active retiree clergy also have permission to officiate. There are a large and growing number of paid children and youth workers in parishes. Church life is sustained by a wide range of volunteers, including church wardens and licensed readers. The latter, who are trained to preach and lead services, number 6,600.
10. The Church currently ordains around 500 clergy each year, of whom around 300 go into full time paid ministry. The latter number is insufficient to offset the number of retirements projected for the next decade as the baby boom generation comes to retirement.
11. More generally, the Church faces significant challenges as a result of a century of declining church attendance and participation. Average weekly attendance at a Church of England service is around one million of whom around 850,000 attend on any given Sunday (though these figures do not include school services and probably underestimate numbers attending at various Fresh Expressions of church). The average age of regular adult attenders has increased significantly over the past generation.
12. Despite that, around 6 in 10 people in England classify themselves as Christian. Of these around a third are non-Anglican. It is estimated that around half a million people each week attend a funeral, wedding or christening led by a Church of England minister. In 2012 50,000 weddings took place in Church of England churches, 70% of the total number of religious weddings solemnised in England.
13. Historically the Church of England was financed by tithes (essentially a form of local taxation) and income from investments and church owned land and property. Now nearly 60% of Church's funding comes from giving, tax recovered on it and grants, around 21% comes from investment income, 17% from fees and trading and 4% from other sources.
14. In 2012 the Church's aggregate income and expenditure was around £1.4bn, of which over £900m of income came in through the parishes and around £110m through cathedrals. Each of the institutions owning property at parish and diocesan level- the parochial church council, the diocesan board of finance and the corporate body of a cathedral - is a charitable body in its own right and responsible for its own finances.
15. The dioceses manage endowments and glebe, which were, until the 1970s, the responsibility of each benefice. The Church Commissioners manage an endowment (as of the end of 2013 amounting to just over £6bn) made up of money returned to the church in 1704 as Queen Anne's Bounty and the assets transferred from bishops and cathedrals in the nineteenth century by act of parliament to facilitate the support of new churches in the new industrial areas. The first call on the Commissioners' funds is the payment of pensions earned by clergy before 1998 when a funded pension scheme was created. Other sums available for distribution go to support episcopal ministry, cathedral ministry, ministry in poorly resourced dioceses and mission development.

16. The Church of England is the largest single provider of schools in the country, through its 40 dioceses. There are nearly 4500 Church of England Primary schools (25% of all primary schools), and over 200 Church of England Secondary schools (6%), between them educating over a million children. Over 400 Church of England schools have become academies (either sponsored or through conversion).
17. Church of England schools are dedicated to being ‘distinctive and inclusive’, serving their local communities by providing opportunities for children from all backgrounds to receive an excellent education within a framework of Christian values. Church of England dioceses recruit, train and support an estimated 22,500 governors.
18. Approximately 500 schools in the independent sector affiliate themselves to an Anglican identity, either through their foundation deed or in their day-to-day ethos. In addition to the colleges of the ancient universities there are 11 Universities with an Anglican foundation, which support the training of over one third of all primary school teachers in the country.

Governance

19. The Church of England is an institution with its own framework of law and beliefs. It is not, however, an organisation or a body corporate. It is a family of charitable bodies, including ancient ecclesiastical corporations (incumbents of parishes and bishops are “corporations sole” in their own right) and others which are charities registered with the Charity Commission.
20. The front line work of the Church of England is at local level in parishes. Conceptually, however, it is the dioceses that are the key institutional units of the Church of England, given the lead responsibility for mission and ministry of each diocesan bishop who is ‘the chief pastor of all that are within his/her diocese, as well laity as clergy’ (Canon C 18).
21. Bishops share the “cure of souls” with the parish clergy who are office holders in their own right and enjoy considerable autonomy. The responsibility for the care and upkeep of the parish church building rests with the parochial church council. The property and other goods of the church are the responsibility of the churchwardens who, once locally elected become ‘officers of the bishop’.
22. Over recent decades dioceses have become increasingly significant in terms of the decision making over the deployment of resources, seeking to ensure that Christian ministry is available in every community through collecting money from parish contributions and redistributing it as necessary to places of need and opportunity. Dioceses now also have the responsibility for paying the stipends of clergy on common tenure.
23. Each diocese has its own synod, bishop’s council, board of finance, board of education and various other bodies with responsibility for particular aspects of church life. Over recent years many dioceses have sought to streamline how these various groups work and interconnect. Each diocese has its own diocesan administration, headed by a diocesan secretary, and has a number of other mandatory office holders including a registrar (legal adviser).
24. There are 40 English dioceses. In addition the General Synod includes representation from the Diocese of Sodor and Man and the Diocese of Gibraltar in Europe. 29 of the English dioceses constitute the province of Canterbury, to which the Diocese in Europe is also attached. The Province of York consists of the other 11 English dioceses plus the Diocese of Sodor and Man.

25. The archbishops' metropolitan jurisdiction for the province is of particular relevance in relation to clergy discipline and episcopal appointments. There is no freestanding provincial administration, though each Archbishop receives legal advice on his metropolitan responsibilities from the relevant provincial registrar.
26. From the Reformation until the nineteenth century the national governance of the Church of England was effectively in the hands of the House of Commons, a body of Anglican laymen, and the House of Lords, where bishops constituted a significant proportion of the membership. Legislation concerning the affairs of the Church of England consisted of Acts of Parliament.
27. During this period, when the Church of England effectively had no national institutional capacity of its own, new ventures - for example in relation to home or overseas mission or the development of church schools or theological education- generally involved the establishment of freestanding charitable bodies. The legacy of this today is the existence of a significant number of independent bodies which are part of the Anglican family but separate from the institutional framework at parish, diocesan or national level.
28. The governance of the Church of England has, evolved significantly over the past century. In 1919 Parliament conferred on the newly created Church Assembly the power to initiate legislation by approving 'Measures', which would become part of the law of the land (having the same statutory effect as an Act of Parliament) following scrutiny by a newly created Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament, approval in each House of Parliament and the granting of Royal Assent. Since then the convention has been that Parliament does not legislate for the internal affairs of the Church of England without its consent.
29. The Church Assembly's power to initiate statute law did not extend to the making of canons. That power was left with the Convocations of Canterbury and York. These provincial synods of bishops and other clergy have their origin in the medieval period. They survived the Reformation though could no longer meet without the Sovereign's consent (and did not do so for more than a century between 1741 and the middle of the Victorian period). Canons of the Church of England remain part of the law of England, but may not conflict with the general law and cannot be made without the Royal Licence.
30. The dual system of legislation- Church Assembly for Measures and Convocations for canons proved complex and in 1970, when the General Synod replaced the Church Assembly, it inherited from the Convocations the power to make canons. Formally, the Synod consists of a House of Laity joined together with the Convocations.

The General Synod

31. The General Synod is a legislative and deliberative assembly that meets in full session on two or sometimes three occasions a year. It consists of about 470 voting members plus ecumenical and some other non-voting representatives. Diocesan bishops and a small number of other people are members of the General Synod by virtue of their office. The remainder are elected. Each General Synod has a five year fixed term.
32. General Synod is not itself a body corporate. It consists of three houses – bishops, clergy and laity. Of these the House of Bishops, because of the particular responsibility of bishops in the governance of the church, meets at least twice a year separately from meetings of the General Synod.

33. The General Synod also has a number of commissions and committees (such as the Faith and Order Commission, the Liturgical Commission, the Business Committee and the Legislative Committee) that meet to discharge particular functions in-between meetings of the General Synod. There are also some statutory National Church Bodies established under legislation, for example the Cathedral Fabric Commission for England, the Church Buildings Council and the Dioceses Commission.

The National Church Institutions (NCIs)

34. Following a governance review in the 1990s the Archbishops' Council was created by statute in 1999. It replaced the Central Board of Finance (which was a registered charity) and the previous Standing Committee and Policy Committee of the General Synod. The Council is a body of 19 members, made up of the Archbishops, the First Church Estates Commissioner, the Prolocutors of the Convocations, the Chair and Vice Chair of the House of Laity, 6 persons elected from the three Houses of the General Synod and up to 6 other persons appointed by the Archbishops and approved by the General Synod.
35. The Council has a coordinating role for national Church business and a number of specific functions such as initiating legislative proposals for the General Synod, establishing remuneration policy in relation to the clergy and distributing to the dioceses funds made available by the Church Commissioners.
36. The Council is also the managing employer for national staff work in areas which include ministry, mission and public affairs, education, cathedrals and church buildings, safeguarding, research and statistics and ecumenical work. The two other main (NCIs), in addition to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in their corporate capacities, are the Church Commissioners and the Pensions Board.
37. The Church Commissioners' main function is to manage the historic endowment of the Church of England (see above). They also have certain other national church functions in relation to parish reorganisation, the provision of diocesan bishops' housing and financial support of cathedrals.
38. The Pensions Board administers a number of pension schemes for those who serve the Church, the largest of which is for the clergy. The Pensions Board also oversees the investment of the pension funds for which it is responsible. As well as being regulated pension trustees the members of the Pensions Board are charitable trustees for funds which support retired clergy in need and in particular subsidised clergy retirement housing. The Pensions Board run a number of care homes and support clergy who need help with housing in retirement through both a rental and mortgage scheme.
39. The staff of the National Churches Institutions, including those providing shared services- the Legal Office, the Communications Office, the Finance Department, HR etc -are almost all jointly employed by the NCIs and on common terms of service. Employment arrangements are overseen by a Board consisting of the Chair of the Archbishops' Council Committee, the First Estates Commissioner and the Chair of the Pensions Board. The Board is supported by a Chief Officers Group Chaired by the Secretary General of the Archbishops' Council.

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October 2015