

GENERAL SYNOD

Religious Communities

Debate on proposal to bring forward a Canon. Paper from the Bishop of Manchester, Chair of the Advisory Council of Relations between Bishops and Religious Communities (ACRBRC)

Introduction

1. The growth in new monastic and emerging Religious Communities over the last decade represents a sign of God's Holy Spirit at work among us. More recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury has set the revival of the Religious Life at the heart of his priorities for his archiepiscopate. This motion for Synod formally invites the Business Committee to bring forward legislation to the July Group of Sessions that would place such communities on a simple canonical footing and underpin the advice and guidance provided to them via the *Handbook of the Religious Life*.
2. Canonical recognition will complement the recent decision by the House of Bishops to reconstitute the *Advisory Council on Relations between Bishops and Religious Communities* as a committee of the House.
3. In bringing this item to Synod, the ACRBRC seeks the general support of Synod to the direction of travel, allows Synod members to gain a deeper insight into the work and witness of Religious Communities and provides space to offer comments that will feed into the framing of any proposed canon.

Rebirth of Religious Communities in the Church of England

4. The re-foundation of monasticism and Religious Communities in the Church of England owes much to the principal societal changes of the mid-nineteenth century. Orders were formed to meet the fastest growing mission needs of the time; providing vital services such as education and healthcare, and enhancing the Church's capacity to be present and fully engaged in some of the poorest urban areas.
5. Then, as in preceding centuries and today, the bonds forged by community identity and common vows proved to be a major force for sustaining women and men working in often extremely demanding contexts. Communities were born, lived and died, with limited support from friendly bishops, usually designated as "Visitor" or "Protector", but neither seeking nor being afforded formal support from a Church that contained significant elements opposed to the reintroduction into the Church of aspects of faith and practice expunged at the Reformation.

The Advisory Council and Handbook

6. By the 1930s, there were many mature communities making a significant contribution to the life of the Church. Some diocesan bishops were Visitors to several communities, but there was no structure either to disseminate good practice, or to support and assist bishops in the exercise of their role of oversight.
7. The *Advisory Council on Relations between Bishops and Religious Communities* was first formed in 1935 in response to the needs of both bishops and community leaders.

In 1943 it produced its first *Directory*, bringing together advice and guidance across the range of issues that communities and their episcopal Visitors found themselves facing. Retitled as the *Handbook of the Religious Life*, versions of this guidance have been produced roughly every ten to fifteen years since. The latest version, to replace that of 2004, will be published shortly.

8. Membership of the Council is elected from the House and College of Bishops, and by members of Recognised Communities, the latter using the same Electoral College as for the election of lay and ordained members of those communities to their General Synod constituency. The chair is appointed by the two Archbishops, and other members, principally drawn from the Acknowledged Communities, are co-opted by the Council.
9. For at least the last 20 years the Council has produced a short Annual Report to the House of Bishops. To strengthen this link and to provide greater clarity as to the status of advice and guidance in the Handbook, in December 2017 the episcopal membership was further strengthened, allowing the Advisory Council to be formally constituted as a Committee of the House, reporting regularly to the House on its activities and with the powers for the episcopal members of the ACRBRC to take decisions on behalf of the House in their meetings.

Safeguarding and Religious Communities

10. The religious communities sector has also been working along with the rest of the Church of England to ensure that it has robust Safeguarding policies in place.
11. House of Bishops Practice Guidance on *Safeguarding and Religious Communities* was issued in 2015.¹ The Practice Guidance is currently being revised to take account of the recommendation made by Dame Moira Gibb in the report into the Peter Ball case that the Church should ensure that all its bodies are fully integrated into their relevant diocesan arrangements for safeguarding.
12. Section 7 of the revised House of Bishops Practice Guidance on *Key Roles and Responsibilities of Church Office Holders and Bodies Practice Guidance* also covers religious communities.²
13. The revisions to the Handbook of Religious Communities contains a much-expanded treatment of Safeguarding to align with this House of Bishops practice guidance.

Recognised and Acknowledged Communities

14. For some decades, Religious Communities within the Church of England have existed in two forms. Recognised communities are those which are organised along the traditional Benedictine vows of **stability**, **conversion of life** and **obedience**, or the “evangelical counsels” of poverty, chastity and obedience. After a noviciate, members

¹ This may be viewed at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/safeguarding%20in%20religious%20communities%20practice%20guidance.pdf>

² *Key Roles and Responsibilities of Church Office Holders and Bodies Practice Guidance* pp. 28 – 29. Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/Roles%20and%20Responsibilities%20Practice%20Guidance%20V2.pdf>

spend a period – usually at least three years – in temporary/first/simple vows after the noviciate and before Solemn or Life vows when they cease to hold personal property, and live either in community or as solitaries.

15. Whilst a small number of Orders are “enclosed”, their members having limited direct engagement outside the monastery, the majority of Communities involve themselves in wider mission and ministry. The combined membership of these communities has declined in recent years and a number of communities have closed.
16. As of 2017, there are 37 Recognised Communities in the Church of England with approximately 350 professed members, about 22% of whom are ordained. A number of communities remain very active in mission and ministry, for example working with asylum seekers and refugees.
17. A wider concept of a Religious Community, open to non-celibates, holding down jobs in wider society, and living in a dispersed instead of gathered form, has been around since at least the early 13th century, when St Francis of Assisi formed his *Third Order* to complement his missional friars and enclosed sisters. It is communities of this nature, referred to as Acknowledged Communities in order to preserve the distinction, that have come to birth and grown very significantly in recent years.
18. Around a dozen communities are presently acknowledged, with several others having expressed formal interest in achieving that status. The document *Towards Acknowledgment*, provides an explanation of the pathway. Some significant and well-known Church organisations, such as CMS and Church Army have reconstituted themselves as communities. Longstanding communities like the Lee Abbey movement have sought Acknowledgement. Fresh initiatives, from the Order of Anglican Cistercians to the Community of St Anselm (the latter based at Lambeth Palace) have come to birth.
19. Details of both Acknowledged and Recognised Communities of the Church of England can be found in the yearbook *Anglican Religious Life*. Whilst literature reflecting on the emerging communities remains relatively limited at present a few examples are offered in the *Further Reading* section below.

The need for a canon

20. Demand for a canonical recognition of Religious Communities has emerged in recent years from two different directions.
21. Firstly, as the number of Acknowledged Communities has grown and their work expanded, the lack of any canonical regularisation of ordained ministries within them, or indeed in Recognised Communities, except for the catch-all use of Permission to Officiate, has left clergy working in such contexts in a position less supported and less accountable than clergy in other ministry sectors, such as parish ministry and chaplaincy.
22. A Working Party of the Advisory Council, led by the Bishop of Winchester, has developed and brought forward proposals which suggest appropriate references to Religious Communities in a handful of existing canons which will regularise the situation and provide clarity to those in ministry, to the bishops with oversight in both diocese and communities, and to communities seeking to grow their work. In order to

ground such amendments, the Church House Legal Office advises that a canon on the Religious Life itself is necessary as a first step. This will also facilitate further canonical reference at any future date.

23. Secondly, the Gibb Report into the abuses perpetrated by Bishop Peter Ball has drawn attention to the ambiguity surrounding the relationships between Religious Communities, including their office holding and ordained members, and the wider structures of the Church. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) has called for evidence regarding the present, as well as past, status and oversight of communities, as part of its own case study of Ball's offending, within its "Anglican Church in England and Wales" strand.
24. There is an increasing awareness within public life that safeguarding applies to those who, whilst not satisfying the narrow definitions of vulnerability applied until recently, are at risk of abuse from individuals who have both significant power over them and high community status. Canonical recognition of communities will, together with the more formal status that the *Handbook* can then be given, create and sustain a framework within which safeguarding responsibilities can more effectively be observed and overseen.
25. It is not proposed at this Group of Sessions to present the draft text for a Canon. Rather Synod is invited to express its general support for the principle, by passing the motion, and to make points relevant to the future drafting process during debate.

Rt Revd David Walker, Bishop of Manchester
Chair of the House of Bishops' Advisory Council for Relations between Bishops and
Religious Communities (ACRBRC)

January 2018

Further reading

Peta Dunstan, *Anglican Religious Life 2018-19* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2017)

The Advisory Council, *Handbook of the Religious Life* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2004)

Ian Adams and Ian Mobsby, "New Monasticism" in *Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition* (eds. Steven Croft et al; Canterbury Press Norwich, 2009)

Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy Burns (eds.), *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2010)

Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook: From Vision to Practice* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2014)

Ian Adams, *Cave, Refectory, Road: monastic rhythms for contemporary living* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2010)

Andy Freeman and Pete Greig, *Punk Monk: new monasticism and the ancient art of breathing* (Survivor, Eastbourne, 2007)

**Published by the General Synod of the Church of England
© The Archbishops' Council 2018**

