

GENERAL SYNOD

**DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION:
REVIEW OF THE WORKINGS OF THE GENERAL SYNOD**

Background note from the Acting Clerk to the Synod

The creation and role of the General Synod

1. The complex processes necessary for canon law revision in the 1950s served as a spur to exploring the possibility of establishing a single legislature for the Church of England, which would consist of the two Convocations of Canterbury and York and the three Houses of the Church Assembly. Until the creation of the General Synod in 1970 the power to pass measures had lain with the Assembly, which had been created in 1919. The power to make canons rested with the Convocations, which were of medieval origin.
2. The Constitution of the General Synod is set out in schedule 2 of the Synodical Government Measure of 1969. This states that the Synod ‘shall consist of the Convocations of Canterbury and York joined together in a House of Bishops and a House of Clergy and having added to them a House of Laity.’ Thus all members of the Synod, whether elected, appointed or ex-officio, become members of one of the three Houses of Synod – Bishops, Clergy or Laity.
3. The Constitution defines the functions of the General Synod under two headings. The first is ‘to consider matters concerning the Church of England and to make provision in respect thereof,’ whether by some form of legislation or in other ways. The other is ‘to consider and express their opinion on any other matters of religious or public interest.’
4. The Church of England Convocations Act 1966, which uncoupled the lifetime of Convocations from the time at which Parliament is summoned or dissolved, provides that the Convocations stand dissolved five years after the date on which they were called together, if not previously dissolved. The Synod is dissolved and comes into being again when the new Convocations are called together. Since 1970 elections have taken place every five years in the autumn and an inaugural meeting held in the November. The Constitution provides, among other things, that the Synod must meet at least twice a year.
5. The 1969 Measure also provided for the establishment of diocesan and deanery synods. Because, unlike the pre-1970 diocesan conferences, the diocesan synods were not to include someone representing every parish it was thought important to have deanery synods on which every parish was represented by at least one member. Diocesan synods were given a number of functions and power to devolve such of these as they chose to their deaneries.

The Bridge and Turnbull Commissions

6. The operation of synodical government was reviewed between 1993 and 1997 by a Commission chaired by Lord Bridge of Harwich. Its report '*Synodical Government of the Church of England: A Review*' noted 'wide acceptance of the general principles of synodical governance and attachment to the general form it takes'. It added that 'The evidence we have considered suggests that synods carry conviction within the Church and in the wider society not only by the decisions they make but by the manner in which they make them.' It went on to note a number of criticisms made of the General Synod in evidence it had received, including:
 - it is too large;
 - it tries to cover too wide an agenda;
 - it is too much of a talking shop;
 - it is too expensive and bureaucratic;
 - it is not representative;
 - its work should be set more fully within a context of prayer and worship;
 - its procedures are too parliamentary and cumbersome;
 - it meets too often;
 - poor communication has led to a gulf between the General Synod and the parishes;
 - the House of Bishops has, to some people, too much power, and to others, not enough.¹
7. In response to this, the Bridge Commission recommended no change to the Synod's present statutory functions. They did suggest an adjustment in the way that suffragan bishops were chosen for election to the General Synod, a repeal of the rules enabling each diocese to elect an archdeacon to the General Synod and a reduction in the number of members of each House from 575 in total. They argued that 'a smaller Synod will in our view encourage more effective representation by enabling a higher proportion of members to engage in discussion and by making interaction between representatives easier'. Most radically, they recommended the abolition of the Upper and Lower Houses of the Convocations of Canterbury and York and the repeal of the role of deanery synods as a layer of synodical government. These changes were not enacted, though the size of the Synod was eventually reduced to 470.
8. While the Bridge Commission was sitting the Archbishops established a separate Commission in 1994, under Bishop Michael Turnbull, to recommend ways of strengthening the effectiveness of the Church's central policy-making and resource direction machinery, and in particular to look at areas of the Church's work which could best be carried out at a national level.
9. The Turnbull Report recommended the creation of a national body of the Church to co-ordinate various aspects of its work, especially the financial and administrative governance of its national institutions (the Church Commissioners, the Pensions Board

¹ '*Synodical Government in the Church of England: A Review*' GS 1252, London: Church House Publishing, 1997.

and the offices of the Archbishops). The Archbishops' Council was accordingly set up by the National Institutions Measure 1998.

10. The Archbishops' Council is an incorporated charitable body. Its statutory objects are to 'co-ordinate, promote, aid and further the work and mission of the Church of England'. Any recommendations of the Archbishops' Council which have legislative implications are sent to the General Synod for legislative consideration.

Frequency of Synod meetings

11. From 1970 until 1994 the Synod met for three groups of sessions each year, usually in February, July and November. In the years between 1995 and 2002 there were some years when Synod met twice and some when it met three times. Since 2003 the pattern has been for two groups of session each year – in London in February and York in July – except in an inaugural year when there is a short additional session in November and when, as in 2012, the Presidents decide that the contingency dates kept for November need to be used for time-critical business.
12. February meetings are generally scheduled to start after lunch on a Monday and finish by lunchtime on Friday (or on Thursday depending on the amount of business to be transacted). July meetings generally start mid-afternoon on Friday and finish not later than Tuesday lunchtime.

Debates and decision-making process

13. The Bridge Review looked at the issue whether the procedures of the General Synod were too closely modelled on the more adversarial style of the Westminster Parliament. It observed that it was understandable that 'in its legislative capacity the Synod should model itself on the procedures of Parliament'. It noted that in addition to this, the Synod has a number of other functions, including approving budgets, debating wider policy issues and scrutinising the work of national church bodies for which other styles of proceedings were used. The review recommended that further work be done to vary the Synod's agenda to make it less adversarial, including panel discussions, presentations and reports by groups. However, while noting that the Synod's procedures may at times appear 'cumbersome and time-consuming' it did not recommend any change to them.
14. The Turnbull Report called for 'Synod legislation that was less prescriptive and detailed, giving more discretion to dioceses and to those in day-to-day charge of various aspects of the Church's work to apply it in ways which best suit their local circumstances'.²

Other Church governance bodies

15. The term 'synodical government' is deeply entrenched but can be misleading, not least because, as the Turnbull report pointed out, synods are analogous to parliaments, not governments. That is to say, synods are custodians of the rule book – which at the

² *Working as One Body: The Report of the Archbishops' Commission on the Organisation of the Church of England*, London: Church House Publishing, 1995, p. 72.

national level means acting as a legislature – and have an important deliberative function. But they do not generally exercise executive powers. Nor are they corporate bodies that can own assets and be accountable for their stewardship. And in an episcopal church there is a leadership role for bishop, just as in parishes there is a leadership role for the incumbent, and that means that decisions are not simply a matter of majority democratic vote.

16. Questions about the role of the Synod and how it operates are not wholly separable from questions about how the Church of England runs more generally. Indeed that is why the Turnbull Commission, though described as the ‘Archbishops’ Commission on the Organisation of the Church of England’, included a chapter on the General Synod, even though the Bridge Commission was still carrying out its own work.

17. In considering whether some fresh review is needed it will be important therefore to be clear whether the main focus should be on the need for and operation of the various levels of the synodical system or whether a wider exercise is wanted looking at organisational and governance issues in the Church of England more generally.

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