GENERAL SYNOD

Making the Synod's Procedures More Effective

Report by the Business Committee

<u>Background</u>

1. The Business Committee has continued to consider ways of making the General Synod's procedures more effective. During the present quinquennium, it has already introduced a number of practical and administrative changes, including the production of more background information for Synod debates. The Committee has also altered the format of its report to the Synod, highlighting key items of business, and has introduced a forecast of future Synod business, which Synod members have generally found helpful. In addition, the Business Committee and the Standing Orders Committee have put forward a series of changes to Standing Orders for improving the handling of liturgical business, in the light of experience gained from the process of authorising Common Worship, and these have been now agreed by the Synod. A further exercise was the Business Committee's review of arrangements for Question Time and various changes were considered by the Synod and subsequently agreed by way of changes to the Standing Orders in February this year.

2. The Business Committee has recently been in discussion with two groups of Synod members, the Communicating of General Synod Group (COGS) and the Making Synod User Friendly Group (MSUFG). The Committee has met with representatives of both Groups and has subsequently

discussed the recommendations from COGS and MSUFG with the Standing Orders Committee. In addition, the Business Committee held an 'at home' at the July Synod last year and a number of recommendations were made in this context by Synod members, many of which echo those from COGS and MSUFG.

3. This report does not provide an extensive or comprehensive review of streamlining the Synod's procedures, but is part of a process of making Synod's business more accessible and expeditious. There will need to be, as a further stage of this process, a careful evaluation of a case for more radical streamlining of legislative processes. The Committee will also be looking at the possibility, in the next Synodical quinquennium, of different ways of handling the Synod's business, for example, through parallel sessions and some variation between formal business and more informal presentations and consultation. It will also explore whether more work should be undertaken in group discussion, followed by appropriate plenary sessions.

4. This report focuses in particular on the subjects of **electronic voting** and issues relating to business management in Synod, including the possibility of reducing the **time allowed for speeches** and finding ways of reducing the **number of amendments** tabled for debate.

5. The Committee has considered a variety of points made by the MSUFG about arrangements for the elections to the new Synod, and the inauguration and induction arrangements. The Committee intends to produce a

report on these matters for the February Groups of Sessions, when the General Synod will be looking at arrangements for Synodical representation for the next quinquennium.

Communicating General Synod

6. The Communicating General Synod Group has now produced the draft of a short resource pack for reporting on Synod in the dioceses - how we can improve communication between the General Synod and the congregations, both in giving and receiving information. The Group has concentrated on how this can be done most economically, quickly and effectively within a diocese, stressing the need for two-way communication in increasing the understanding of how the work of the Synod affects the parishes and the interest in it. The Group has been particularly concerned with the necessity for speed of information so that congregations are not dependent on the media.

7. The Group consulted widely through contact members in each diocese and the resource pack is the outcome of the concerns and suggestions voiced by a great many, both clergy and laity. It contains a set of recommendations for dioceses, including suggestions for diocesan websites. Sections also cover methods of reporting.   A copy of the draft has been distributed at this Synod to each diocesan contact member, and copies are available to Synod members for reference.   Comments and suggestions are warmly welcomed and should be given to the convener of the Group, Mrs Diana Webster. There will also be a joint fringe meeting with the MSUFG on the subject of making Synod more accessible on Saturday 11 July.

8.   The Synod is invited to note these ongoing developments.

Electronic Voting

9.   The Synod is invited to give consideration to the possibility of introducing an electronic voting system for the London Groups of Sessions in Church House, Westminster, which could also be used for the York Groups of Sessions at the University of York. The Committee has discussed the matter with the Corporation of the Church House. The Corporation has undertaken some research on available systems and the Business Committee has seen a demonstration of a combined microphone/electronic voting system from IML Systems. The system would also have the capacity to enable the Chair of the debate to see precisely who wished to speak in a debate, should Synod choose to use this facility.

10. In considering the concept of electronic voting, the Synod may wish to reflect on the following factors:

     In favour:

     •   electronic voting would considerably speed the conduct of Synod business and it would therefore make a significant saving of time; it would provide a very high degree of accuracy and consistency;

     •   it would be less labour-intensive for staff and members alike;

- it could reduce the scope for changes in voting between a close vote on a count of a show of hands and a count through the doors;

- it could provide clearer verification of the identity of individual voters.

Against:

- It could over-hasten the pace of Synod business and the process of decision-taking when 'space for reflection' might be helpful before or after a tense or critical vote (although the Chair, at his or her discretion, could allow for a period of quiet);

- the system could record how individuals voted but, because of data protection requirements, its adoption would, unless Synod explicitly provided to the contrary, be very likely in practice to involve a shift from an open, public system to a secret voting system, and public accountability of members could thereby be reduced; (however, it is proposed that voting, initially, by a show of hands would be retained as the general practice, and this will maintain a measure of visible accountability – see para 13);

- the Synod customarily votes as a single Synod, and comparatively rarely votes by Houses; this is partly because of the time pressure. The introduction of electronic voting could increase the number and frequency of votes by Houses.

11.   Electronic voting systems have been introduced in several other Churches, such as the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, the Church of Scotland and the Lutheran Churches of Finland and Sweden, and the experience has been generally positive. (In contrast, the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons considered the subject of voting methods in the Commons in 1998. The response to a consultation exercise from MPs indicated that the present system was preferred to electronic voting by 53% of respondents, and in the light of this the Select Committee decided to pursue the matter no further.)

12.   After extensive discussion, the Business Committee took the view that consideration of electronic voting should be actively pursued and that the question of principle should be put to the Synod in July**. If the Synod is minded to proceed, the following arrangements would be required. In order to expedite the introduction of electronic voting, it is proposed to proceed initially by making changes to the Synod's Standing Orders in February 2005, so that (a) a count of the whole Synod and (b) a division by Houses could be undertaken electronically**. **This would enable the system to be introduced from the start of the next quinquennium in November 2005.**. An electronic division of the whole Synod would, however, require an amendment to Article 5(4) of the Constitution. This could be done by inserting (at Revision Committee stage) an appropriate provision in the draft Miscellaneous Provisions Measure which is to be introduced in July 2004, with a view to the legislative provision being made by the beginning of 2006. In practice, the need for a division of the whole Synod seems, at the very least, likely to be significantly

reduced with the introduction of electronic voting. At present, it is customarily used to achieve precise voting figures (when there is a close vote on a show of hands or count), but the provision of electronic voting will obviate the need for an actual division of the whole Synod for that purpose.

13. The Business Committee proposes that, if Synod agrees the principle of an electronic voting system, it should be introduced for counts of the whole Synod and divisions by Houses, by amending Standing Orders. (The provision for voting, initially, by show of hands would be retained as the general practice.) As regards divisions of the whole House, the Business Committee considers that the necessary legislative provision should be sought, but that current normal arrangements would be retained for this purpose until the Constitution is amended.

14. The Corporation of the Church House has helpfully indicated that, subject to the formal agreement of the Church House Conference Centre Board, an electronic voting system could be purchased and introduced prior to the planned Assembly Hall refurbishment, for example, in time for the Inaugural Group of Sessions of the new Synod in November 2005, as indicated above.

15. As regards the reliability of the system, IML Systems have stated that they have received no reports of any breakdowns in any of their 800 installations over the past year. However the Business Committee considers that it would initially be prudent to retain the option of reverting to manual arrangements on a contingency basis.

16. As regards the security of the system, it is proposed that a PIN number should be displayed in the Assembly Hall each time an electronic vote takes place, to ensure that only those in the Assembly Hall and in the gallery can properly vote.   An amendment to Standing Orders would be required to facilitate voting from the gallery. Extra provision would be made for the sight impaired.

17. As regards cost, it is proposed that the Corporation of the Church House will purchase the system at a capital cost of about £250,000, and this will be made available not only to the General Synod, but also to the range of outside conference users of the Assembly Hall. It is expected that the cost per Group of Sessions will be in the order of £5,000-£8,000. The system will be fully portable to York, at no significant extra cost.

Conduct of Sessions of the General Synod

Speech limits

18. The Business Committee, in consultation with the Standing Orders Committee, has been considering various possibilities for expediting the business, including the possibility that the time allowed for speeches under Standing Order 21 should be reduced (for example, by reducing the normal maximum for opening speeches for 'take note' motions from 15 to 10 minutes, and/or reducing the normal maximum for contributions to debates from 10 to 5 minutes).

19. The Business Committee recognises that there are arguments in favour and against such limitation. With generally busy and crowded agendas, the Committee

considers that some reduction in the length of speeches would be desirable, but it recognises that the Chairs of the Synod already have the discretion to impose a lower limit on the length of speeches, even at the outset of a debate. The Business Committee has received a number of representations about the speech limits and some correspondents have even favoured a reduction in the normal maximum to three minutes. However, other correspondents have suggested that there should continue to be the facility for longer, weighty speeches, particularly with theological reflection, and there would be a danger in moving towards what might be regarded as a 'sound-bite' culture. The Business Committee has concluded that the advantages of reducing speech limits outweigh the disadvantages, and takes the view that this would expedite Synod's business and enable an even greater number of speeches and speakers to be heard in the Synod. The Chair would, as now, retain a discretion under the Standing Orders to shorten **or lengthen** the speech limit in any particular debate. The Committee would, in any case, encourage those presenting debates to be as succinct as possible and to avoid repeating or summarising the report's content in the introductory speech.

20. The Standing Orders Committee is opposed to reducing the time allowed for speeches, and considers that the present arrangements, with the flexibility afforded to the Chair of the debate, are satisfactory and workable. It considers that any reduction, notwithstanding a continuing discretion for the chair to lengthen the limit, would inhibit the scope for substantial, weighty contributions to debate.

21. The Business Committee has nevertheless decided that the time has come to test the mind of the Synod on the principle of reducing the standard length of speeches.

Amendments

22. There has also been a proposal that amendments should be debated only if they have received a degree of support from Synod members, in view of the large number of amendments (both of a substantive and more detailed character) which are being put down for some debates, some of which carry little support in the Synod and may be tabled primarily with a view to securing a guaranteed opportunity to speak (the so called 'bus ticket amendment').

23. The Business Committee would like to test the mind of the Synod on the possibility of producing downward pressure on the number of amendments tabled for debate. There are in principle a number of ways in which this could be done and it would be important to find one which did not introduce unreasonable barriers. (One possibility would be to require that an intending mover of an amendment should obtain, say, a small number of signatures in support of the amendment before it can be debated). At this stage Synod is being asked to address whether**, in principle**, it wants some new rules drawn up, not what the rules should be. It would have a further opportunity to consider specific proposals.

24. The Standing Orders Committee considers that the present facilities available to Chairs of debate (for example, through use of speech limits) are sufficient to transact the business effectively and equitably; and any

limitation on amendments could derogate from the exercise of members' rights.

25.   The Business Committee nevertheless feels that the time is right to address the question of limiting the number of amendments in view of the pressure which large numbers of amendments have imposed on debates in recent Group of Sessions, and wishes to test the mind of the Synod.

Accessibility of Information

26.   It has been proposed that all reports should have an executive summary, and the Business Committee considers that this would be helpful with many of the longer reports. However, the Committee considers that membership of the General Synod implies that members have to commit some time and be prepared to read a quantity of papers as part of the responsibility of membership. It has also been suggested that all printed reports should be in either A4 or A5 format but not both, but the Committee considers that the present mixed economy is workable. The A4 format is needed for some legal, financial and statistical documents (for example, with tabulations), but there would be some practical difficulty for circulations if all the material was in A4 format.

27.   The Business Committee also notes the recommendation from MSUFG that reports should be available on the Church of England website and we are working towards this objective. The Committee also encourages generally greater electronic availability of information. About 80% of Synod members now have regular e-mail access, but hard copies are still needed for use in Synod and for

those members not on e-mail. The Committee also recognises that it is unrealistic and impracticable to expect Synod members to download and print out large Synod documents. Nevertheless the Committee considers it important to develop electronic *access* to information.

Technological Improvements

28.   Electronic voting has already been discussed in paragraphs 9-17 above, and the Business Committee therefore considers that some alternatives suggested by MSUFG (such as the use of signs for members to indicate their intention to speak) should only be considered further if the Synod decides not to proceed with electronic voting. It has also been suggested that a PowerPoint display should be used to show item numbers, motions and amendments, but the Committee has investigated the practicality of this and regrettably there are a number of serious practical and technical problems in presenting this information on screen during debates.

Venues and Meeting Times for Synod

29.   The Business Committee has considered various proposals about re-scheduling Synod to assist those lay people who need to take annual leave, but it believes that the present balance between a mid-week London Synod and a York Synod over a long weekend strikes the right balance between the needs of the different Houses of the General Synod. As regards the venues, the Committee also feels that the present balance between Church House, Westminster and the University of York is

reasonable. The Committee has examined a number of alternatives to the University of York, but York continues to offer the best and most comprehensive facilities in the North of England for the Synod's needs. The General Synod is the Synod of both provinces of the Church of England and for many years it has been considered appropriate for the Synod to meet once a year in the Northern Province. The Business Committee has also examined the question of access for disabled people both in London and York and is pleased to note that steps have been, and will continue to be, taken to improve access for disabled people in both venues.

Chairing of Debates

30. Although the points which have been made by MSUFG and others are not strictly for the Business Committee, the Committee would nevertheless wish to encourage the Panel of Chairmen to ensure that as many maiden speeches are heard during a Group of Sessions as possible. The Committee recognises that the Panel of Chairmen endeavours to achieve a wide spread and balance in the selection of speakers, and it notes that the Chairs have access to lists of the number of occasions on which Synod members have spoken during the Group of Sessions.

Group discussions

31. MSUFG has proposed the development of small groups for discussion, mutual support and prayer. The Business Committee is committed to arranging Bible study groups, at least biennially, and would encourage Synod members

to organise other groups on an informal basis for mutual support and encouragement.

32.   There is the wider question for future consideration as to whether there should be greater use of group discussion to assist the Synod in its deliberations. MSUFG have pointed out that groups can assist new members to get to know people and to feel at home; they can be used for Bible study and prayer, and they can be used for discussions which then can be fed back into the main debate. The Committee accepts that the present parliamentary style of the Synod is not always best suited to handling the subject matter, and that groups of, say, 15-20 people, which comprise a mixture of laity, clergy and bishops, men and women, experienced and new members, from different dioceses and different traditions, are likely over a period of time to promote greater understanding and capacity for Synod members to listen to each other.

Elections and Appointments

33.   MSUFG has proposed that prospective Synod members should receive help in producing election addresses, and that there should be some encouragement at national level for people to stand for the Synod. It has also been suggested that there should be a system of mentoring for new Synod members. All these matters will be considered by the Business Committee and a report will be circulated to the Synod in time for the February Group of Sessions. The Group has also made a number of proposals relating to the appointment of Boards, Councils and Committees, and these will be taken into account in the review of constitutions of bodies answerable to the

Synod through the Archbishops' Council, which will also be presented to the Synod for consideration next February.

Conclusion

34. The Synod is invited to note these developments identified in this report, and to express its mind on the following three proposals, as set out in the motion before Synod:

> 'That this Synod invite the Standing Orders Committee, in consultation with the Business Committee, to
>
> (a) introduce amendments to the Standing Orders and the Constitution to permit votes to be recorded electronically;
>
> (b) consider reducing the time normally allowed for speeches under Standing Order 21; and
>
> (c) consider ways in which downward pressure can be applied in relation to the number of amendments tabled for debate .'

35. The Chairman for the debate, with the general consent of the Synod (SO 23), may divide the above text, so that the parts can be voted upon individually.

36. These propositions will help to test the Synod's mind on a representative group of issues, and they will assist both the Business Committee and the Standing Orders

Committee in their further thinking about making the Synod's procedures more effective.

On behalf of the Business Committee

Alan Hawker

May 2004