

Dioceses Commission

Annual Report for 2023

1. The Dioceses Commission is required to report annually to the General Synod.

Membership and staff

2. The Commission consists of a Chair and Vice-Chair appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, four members elected by the General Synod, and four members appointed by the Appointments Committee.

3. The membership and staff of the Commission are as follows:

Chair:	Dame Caroline Spelman
Vice Chair:	The Ven. Luke Irvine Capel (Chichester)
Elected Members:	The Ven. Stewart Fyfe (Carlisle) Canon Robert Hammond (Chelmsford) The Revd Neil Patterson (Hereford) Mr Clive Scowen (London)
Appointed Members:	The Ven. Karen Lund (Manchester) Mrs Ruth Martin (Southwark) Mrs Sue Slater (Lincoln) The Rt Revd Paul Williams, Bishop of Southwell & Nottingham
Secretary:	Ms Jenny Axtell

Role of the Commission

4. Information about the Commission and its work can be found on the Commission's pages of the Church of England web site:
<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/dioceses-commission>
5. As a summary, the Commission's main duties and responsibilities are laid down by the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007. Its principal duties and powers relating to:
 - the provincial and diocesan structure of the Church of England,
 - good practice in diocesan administration, and
 - the creation and filling of suffragan see.
6. The Commission's primary duty is to keep under review the provincial and diocesan structure of the Church of England and in particular:
 - the size, boundaries, and the number of provinces.
 - the size, boundaries and number of dioceses and their distribution between the provinces.
 - the number and distribution of bishops and the arrangements for episcopal oversight.

Business undertaken

7. The Commission has continued playing its part in ongoing conversations regarding episcopal ministry and how this can best enable missional effectiveness. At the request of the Emerging Church of England Steering Group, the Dioceses Commission undertook the second phase of the 'Bishops and their ministries' consultation at the end of 2022, with analysis and discussion of the findings taking place in the first half of 2023. The first phase of the consultation (led by Lambeth Palace) looked at the culture of episcopacy, whilst this second phase looked at structures. The consultation questions focussed on two topics:

- a) diocesan structures – asking for views on possible options for dioceses (combining dioceses, increased regional working, pooling of back-office functions and services) and,
- b) the role of suffragan bishops.

The consultees for both phases were key office holders including Diocesan Secretaries, the College of Bishops, Archdeacons and Diocesan Clergy and Lay Chairs.

8. The Dioceses Commission discussed the findings of the consultation in its meetings throughout 2023 and, regarding diocesan structures, made a number of recommendations to the Archbishops, to which they have given their support. In summary:

- i. A centrally-led approach to diocesan restructuring with multiple and large-scale projects to combine dioceses is not recommended. (However, the Dioceses Commission does recognise that there exist some structural challenges in some places which need to be addressed).
- ii. Building on work already done through the Church's Transforming Effectiveness Programme, exploring what decisions or functions are currently made and are best done at which level: national, regional, diocesan, local.
- iii. Encouragement of collaborative working between dioceses, including working with various departments in the National Church Institutions on what support and incentives could be available.
- iv. Exploring how to encourage and engage with dioceses that may benefit from reviewing their structures and considering closer working with other dioceses.
- v. Make recommendations regarding the equipping and development of diocesan and suffragan bishops.
- vi. Work with the Archbishops' Advisors for Appointments and Vocations to explore how the Dioceses Commission can be utilised in the episcopal discernment and recruitment processes.

9. The Commission is now looking at how it can proactively encourage and support increased collaboration between dioceses, working closely with the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich in his role as episcopal lead for Transforming Effectiveness. The Chair of the Commission and the Bishop are developing a strategy for this and working with the Secretary and the Executive Chair of the

Diocesan Secretaries to gather examples of collaboration from across the country, both the successes and challenges. They will host a gathering of those with experience and interest in collaboration in Spring 2024 with the aim of further exploring and developing possible and demonstrable ways forward for inter-diocesan collaboration. The Commission continues to liaise with the Archbishops' Secretary for Appointments regarding how the desire for bishops to explore inter-diocesan collaboration and consider structures might be woven into the processes for the discernment and appointment of diocesan bishops. It is keen that the consideration of how diocesan structures can best serve mission and ministry, and how dioceses can work well together, is addressed in timely fashion, particularly when a diocesan vacancy is upcoming. The Commission stands ready to assist dioceses and bishops in this.

10. In light of the consultation feedback, the Commission has not recommended that *all* suffragan bishops should be given geographical responsibilities, but that this should remain dependent on the diocesan needs and local context. Portfolio responsibilities are beneficial to the suffragan and to the diocese and are to be encouraged, both for those suffragans with geographical responsibilities and those working across their diocese. As in the first phase of the consultation, there was a clear call for suffragan roles and responsibilities to be clearly defined and communicated.
11. Through the consultation the Commission received feedback regarding the equipping and development of bishops - both suffragan and diocesan – as well as the need for clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The Commission will be engaging with the Ministry Council and Development Advisory Group to share its findings and suggestions.
12. The Commission also welcomed the Bishop of Leeds to one of its meetings to hear his valuable reflections on the creation of the Diocese of Leeds, almost 10 years on.
13. The Chair of the Commission gave the Lyndwood Lecture for the Ecclesiastical Law Society in November, at which she shared about the current work of the Commission and answered a number of engaging questions from the audience.
14. The Commission is keen to ensure that it links well with other areas of the Church's national work and structures, including those leading the Governance Project and the bodies and programmes of work already mentioned.

Suffragan sees

15. The Commission continues to carry out its responsibilities, notably its statutory role in respect of the filling of suffragan sees. It seeks to ensure that any proposal to fill suffragan sees should make sense in the current financial climate, be rooted in the diocese's mission strategy as well as furthering the Church of England's Vision and Strategy, cohere with the roles of others in the diocesan senior leadership team, and include roles that are inherently episcopal. Members have been particularly keen to ensure that a suffragan bishop will have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, whether geographic or portfolio or both, and

have also taken the opportunity to discuss with the bishops presenting how their diocese is collaborating with others.

16. Members have been grateful for high quality submissions which have given considerable thought to the needs of the Church at a diocesan, regional and national level. The Commission would like to thank the bishops and their representatives who have taken the time to present their proposals and has enjoyed meeting them to discuss at its meetings. In January 2023 the Commission refreshed its guidance for diocesan bishops wishing to submit proposals to fill a see. It looks forward to more conversations in 2024.
17. In exercising its responsibilities under section 17 of the Dioceses and Pastoral Mission Measure 2007, the Commission considered, and agreed with, proposals to fill the following suffragan sees during the year:
 - Swindon (Diocese of Bristol)
 - Warwick (Diocese of Coventry)
 - Edmonton (Diocese of London)
 - Wolverhampton (Diocese of Lichfield)
 - Burnley (Diocese of Blackburn)
 - Woolwich (Diocese of Southwark)
 - The post of the Suffragan Bishop in Europe (Diocese of Europe)
 - Richborough (Provincial Episcopal Visitor, Diocese of Canterbury)
18. The Commission also considered a proposal from the Diocese of Canterbury to fill the see of Maidstone. This see became dormant in 2022 when the national role providing episcopal oversight for Evangelical Complementarian parishes was moved to the see of Ebbsfleet. The submission proposed a combined role of archdeacon and bishop which also supports the Bishop of Dover. The Commission was not convinced that a sufficiently compelling strategic case had been made for the role and had concerns about the nature of the role that was envisaged. The Dioceses Commission therefore deemed that the proposed role needed further consideration and so did not agree with the proposal to fill the see at this time.

On behalf of the Dioceses Commission:
Dame Caroline Spelman, Chair
January 2024