

Editorial

Synods and Conferences

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At the opening of the fourth and final session of the Second Vatican Council in September 1965, Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops. In his Moto Proprio *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, by which the Synod was instituted, the Pope stated that the Council, at which all serving bishops were gathered, was the source of his conviction that the Pope should collaborate with bishops more closely. The Synod has since met fifteen times in ordinary session and a sixteenth session is currently in progress.

Pope Francis has already presided at three ordinary sessions of the Synod, on evangelization (October 2012), the family (October 2015) and young people (October 2018). Although each of these themes is close to his heart, the organization of these Synods was essentially unchanged from the established pattern. On 15 September 2018, however, he promulgated the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio*, on the Synod of Bishops. The Pope here endorses the collaborative principle by which the Synod was founded, though he greatly broadens its dimensions to encompass the co-working not just of the Pope and other bishops but of the bishops and the whole Church. Bishops are, like all Christians, members of the people of God and of the Church by virtue of their baptism. They are thereby teachers but also disciples, walking as shepherds sometimes in front of their people but at other times within their midst and behind them. This suggests that the Synod of Bishops ‘must increasingly become a privileged instrument for *listening* to the People of God’.¹ Local preparations for the Synod are expected to include consultation with clergy and laypeople, including via presbyteral and diocesan pastoral councils.

¹ *Episcopalis communio* 6, at

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html#_edn1 (accessed 27 April 2022).

The Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops has become commonly known as the 'synod on synodality'. It was announced on 7 March 2020, two days before the whole of Italy entered into quarantine due to the coronavirus. As a result of the ongoing disruption caused by the pandemic, in May 2021 the plan for the Synod to meet in Rome in October 2022 was radically revised by the publication of a four-phase pathway. The start date was brought forward by a year, with a diocesan phase focusing on listening and discernment commencing in October 2021 and continuing until April 2022. This is now being followed by an episcopal conference phase, in which nationally grouped bishops synthesize their diocesan contributions, and then by a continental phase. The Synod of Bishops is scheduled to convene in Rome in October 2023. The final approved synodical document will have magisterial teaching authority.

The Anglican Communion's Lambeth Conference has a longer history, having first been convened in 1867. Similarly to the Synod of Bishops, the original idea for the Conference was a personal initiative, in this case of the Archbishop of Canterbury as the senior primate and spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion. Moreover, like a Synod, the convening of a Conference is also the archbishop's personal initiative. Plans for the Lambeth Conference have also been changed, as a result initially of a desire to have time to increase episcopal collegiality and then thanks to the Covid pandemic. Because the Conference has, since 1948, taken place every ten years, a Conference might have been expected to have taken place in 2018, but arrangements did not advance. The reasons that have been cited include the ongoing controversy over gay clergy and the fact that the present Archbishop of Canterbury, who took office in March 2013, would have been unable to visit each of the 39 primates before a summer 2018 Conference. The 2016 Primates' Meeting agreed to a Conference in 2020 and preparations advanced, including a special issue of this journal focused on the 1920 Conference, of which it would have been the centenary.² However, in March of that year, when the pandemic hit, this was rescheduled to 2021. Four months later, as the pandemic worsened, a further postponement was announced to 26 July to 8 August 2022.

The theme of the forthcoming Lambeth Conference is what it means to be God's Church for God's World. As previously, Bible study will form an important part of the

² *Ecclesiology* 16.2 (2020).

Conference and the focal biblical text for this Conference is 1 Peter. Other elements include daily morning and evening prayer and celebration of the Eucharist, plenary sessions, and regular meetings of smaller groups of bishops to discuss a range of programme themes. These include mission and evangelism, safe church, communion, reconciliation, environment, Christian unity, interfaith relations and discipleship. For the first time, optional virtual meetings during the year leading up to the conference have been enabling bishops to connect, discuss and reflect in advance of the Conference in Canterbury.

Since the start of the twentieth century, Archbishops of Canterbury have typically taken office, prepared for a Lambeth Conference, presided at it, then demitted office. During this period only two Archbishops have presided at two conferences (Randall Davidson in 1908 and 1920 and Geoffrey Fisher in 1948 and 1968) and just one has not presided at a Conference (William Temple, owing to his short period at Canterbury before his death). Most Archbishops in this period have attended at least one previous Conference as a bishop before presiding: Davidson in 1898 as Bishop of Winchester; Cosmo Gordon Lang in 1908 as Bishop of Stepney and 1920 as Archbishop of York; Michael Ramsey in 1958 as Archbishop of York; Donald Coggan in 1958 as Bishop of Bradford and 1968 as Archbishop of York; Robert Runcie in 1978 as Bishop of St Albans; George Carey in 1988 as Bishop of Bath and Wells; and Rowan Williams in 1998 as Bishop of Monmouth. The two exceptions are Geoffrey Fisher, who in 1930 was headmaster of Repton, and now Justin Welby, who in 2008 was Dean of Liverpool.

As already described, the 2022 Lambeth Conference has taken advantage of the rapidly increased use of virtual communications precipitated by the pandemic by establishing a year-long cycle of preparatory meetings. This is a welcome development and will undoubtedly aid the transition of bishops from their diocesan contexts into the Conference setting. For most bishops the daily reality of ministry means exercising leadership and authority in their own diocese with little contact with many other bishops. On arriving at the Conference, bishops sometimes describe the strangeness of encountering so many other bishops and concretely experiencing the global collegiality and accountability that it represents. This helps to account for why some may find it demanding to make the transition from decision mode into listening mode.

However, beyond this not much has changed. As before, a marketplace will provide a point at which visitors may connect with the Conference, and there is a sizeable body of lay staff and volunteers. Nevertheless, unlike the Synod of Bishops, the Lambeth Conference has

made no effort to involve the wider Anglican people of God in its deliberations either before or during its meeting.³ Extraordinarily, a parallel Spouses' Programme has yet again been provided, with resource being allocated to this rather than to engaging a less exclusive subset of the Anglican people of God. In contrast, although the seriousness with which the diocesan phase of the Synod of Bishops has been taken by individual bishops has certainly been variable, it has at best included inclusive and open reflection that, whatever the Synod's final document contains, is likely to be transformative for dioceses and parishes. Because of the leadership of Pope Francis, the people of God have been drawn into the synodal prayer, reflection and debate as never before. The planning and scheduling of the Lambeth Conference have, in contrast, been dictated by attempts to reduce disputes between bishops and to minimize the number of episcopal boycotts. Maintaining the Spouses' Programme is an important component of this strategy, because it is highly valued by bishops from conservative cultures for whom (and for whose wives in all probability also) it would seem unusual to spend time away unless they were accompanied by their wives.

The Lambeth Conference is, of course, several times the size of a Synod of Bishops, although much smaller than an Ecumenical Council. The 2008 Lambeth Conference included about 680 bishops, their spouses and 70 ecumenical guests. Around a third of invited bishops, mostly from African Churches, boycotted that Conference. In the Roman Catholic Church, the physical gathering in Rome for Synods of Bishops is limited to roughly 250 bishops, elected by the 115 bishops' conferences worldwide according to size. However, there is provision for the Pope to increase representation up to a maximum 15% of bishops. The Synod may also include theological experts, ecumenical observers and lay auditors. In contrast, the Second Vatican Council comprised about 2500 serving bishops, 500 experts, 80 observers and 40 auditors.

While promoting a servant model of leadership, the Pope is both a sovereign ruler and the leader of a single and institutionally unified global Church. In contrast, the Archbishop of Canterbury has no formal political power beyond a seat in the House of Lords within the

³ This is consistent with proposals currently under consideration in the Church of England to increase centralized executive decision-making and reduce the competence and authority of General Synod, which is the principal organ through which laypeople exercise authority and responsibility at national level. See Paul Avis, 'The Roles of the Ecclesial Orders in the Governance of the Church', *Ecclesiology* 18 (2022), 3–9.

United Kingdom Parliament. Queen Elizabeth II, not he, is Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The royal supremacy is now symbolic and exemplary rather than executive, yet nothing more tangible can seemingly replace it. This fact is illustrated by the history of the ill-fated Anglican Covenant. The Covenant was designed to promote listening and to establish a framework for resolving disputes between member Churches of the Communion, including a quasi-legal process of reconciliation with the possibility of disciplinary sanctions. However, in the Church of England individual dioceses were legally required by General Synod to debate the Covenant and vote on it, because it would have brought about a change in relations with the other Anglican Churches. A majority of English diocesan synods voted against the proposed Covenant, effectively burying it. Authority in the Anglican Communion thus remains diffuse, with no further proposals on the table to alter this.⁴

The fact that the Lambeth Conference lacks any legal authority over the constituent Churches of the Communion is consistent with the statement in the twenty-first Article of Religion, appended to *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662) that even General Councils of the Church may err. If a conciliar decision may in principle be wrong, the grounds for enforcing it appear limited. In contrast, the final approved document of the current Synod of Bishops, which will be the product of deliberations involving the whole people of God, will become part of magisterial teaching and therefore must be accepted by the Roman Catholic faithful. In so far as such teaching may be identified with infallibility, it is the whole Church that is infallible. Pope Francis presents infallibility as belonging 'to the people as a whole' when they agree in matters of faith and morals.⁵ Ideally, the whole Church, free from coercive constraint or control of any kind and responsive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, truthfully articulates for its present context the principles by which it wishes to live.

The Lambeth Conference has changed greatly over the decades. In 1958, when travel and communications were much more arduous than today, it lasted five weeks. This time it will occupy just a fortnight. Since the rise of quick and cheap global travel it has been

⁴ For discussion, see the chapters by Benjamin M. Guyer and Gregory K. Cameron in *The Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity and Purpose*, ed. Paul Avis and Benjamin M. Guyer (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

⁵ *Episcopalis communio* 6, citing *Lumen Gentium* 12, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), vol. 2, p. 858.

suggested that the Conference could meet more frequently than once a decade but for a shorter time period. It has also been mooted that the Conference could meet somewhere other than Canterbury, although changing only the venue and not the format would be unlikely to achieve much. The received concept of the Lambeth Conference pivots on the fact that it is the Archbishop of Canterbury who invites the bishops to the seat of his ministry and the mother church of the Communion: Canterbury and its cathedral. The rapid expansion of communications brought by the pandemic has opened further possibilities. The Conference now requires restructuring to reflect a Church in which the whole Anglican people of God are involved in prayer, reflection and decisions. A product of this could well be a more unified Conference that reflects the reality of a Communion in which the current high levels of disagreement between bishops may not mirror the more extensive common ground on which the people of God stand. For inspiration, close attention to the principles, planning and outcomes of the current Synod of Bishops would be a good way to start.