



Open Synod Group

Newsletter

Summer 2021

President : Right Rev Trevor Willmott, Bishop of Dover
Chair : Robin Back, Norwich

Guest Editor : Simon Talbott, Ely

Editorial

It's a great pleasure to be invited to be the guest editor of the Newsletter as we approach the end of this lengthened quinquennium (or to be more exact, this sexennium - which does sound faintly racy!). It also gives our Editor the opportunity to give a retrospective on his years on Synod and a chance to encourage new members to stand and to consider the Open Synod's contribution to the life of Synod.

When I was elected back in the autumn of 2015 to my first term as a Proctor in Convocation it was with a certain reservation that I prepared to head off to London for the inaugural Group of Sessions. I had picked up many impressions from friends and colleagues who had served on GS, which painted a range of views from the cynical to the utterly besotted (not many of these I have to admit!).

I had served on a Church Commissioners committee for a while, so Church House was familiar ground, which was a great help in settling in. The inaugural meeting was memorable, a highpoint being the experience of worshipping as a whole Synod in Westminster Abbey and having Her Majesty the Queen address us at the start of business. It was also good to run into several colleagues from around the Church of England who I had not seen in years. Overall I have enjoyed the six years, although like most members the last 18 months has been a trial.



Meeting by Zoom (indeed life by Zoom!) is a poor substitute for the personal interactions in the Synod Hall or in the tea room (where a great deal of informal business is transacted!). I have just about found my feet in the sometimes complicated workings of GS and this is why I shall be standing for election this autumn. It is often commented that you only become really effective after your first term and I can now appreciate the wisdom behind this. Finally, if I am elected I hope to contribute to helping the Church of England chart it's way into the post-Covid era. It will also be good to make new friendships and keep up contact with old friends.

I remind you that, as always, those who contribute do so from a personal perspective and the views expressed do not represent a position of the Open Synod Group.

Times Past and Hope for the Future

Tim Hind, Bath & Wells

Where did the last 26 years go? I was a young(ish), comparatively naive but enthusiastic 45 year old who entered Church House for my first taste of General Synod. I had no idea what I would be led to do. I hope by reading this you will be inspired to make the most of General Synod and the Open Synod Group.



General Synod

I have spent all my life, I can see now, being nudged by God to do things. It was a nudge that put me onto PCC in 1975 - another in 1981 that prompted me to stand for Deanery Synod (well it's only another 3 meetings a year) and a year later I found myself on Diocesan Synod. I cut my teeth on the Boards of Patronage and Education. I was nudged into being Lay Chair of Deanery Synod in 1985 and so it went on.

I have come across many inspirational nudgers during my time and it was Dick Acworth, Archdeacon of Wells, who prompted me to stand for General Synod. I stood in 1990 and was 9th when we needed 8, in 1993 (by-election) when I was 3rd and we needed 2. Why couldn't I have had a clear "yes" or "no"!

Pensions Board

So it was that, finally, I was elected in 1995. One of the first things that came through my door was an invitation to stand for the Pensions Board. I had been working for a Life & Pensions company for 23 years and this seemed like another dig in the ribs. I was on the board for 15 years and left after a brief period as Vice-Chair. It was an emotional roller coaster that saw the Pensions Board transformed from a relatively "well meaning" bunch of committed trustees to a much more "professionally oriented" group as legislation and financial circumstances continued to increase the need for better qualified, trained guardians. During that time I represented the Pensions Board on, first, ABM and, subsequently on DRACS.

Archbishops' Council

In 2010 I was elected (again following suggestions) to be Vice-Chair of the House of Laity and so became a member of Archbishops' Council and all the other things that go with that role. As a result, I was able to play my part in the Women in the Episcopate finale.

It was a time (like many others) where conflicting demands meant there were significant strains within the Synod. During 2010-15, the council had to deal with Women Bishops, Safeguarding and "From Anecdote to Evidence" as well as the increasing pressure to deal with secular changes to Marriage and Civil Partnerships and the internal agonising over our discriminatory treatment of our LGBTI+ clergy, staff and volunteers. Not dealing appropriately with any one of these four competing issues could have put the Church into a steeper decline.

Open Synod Group

I am painting the picture of my time on Synod as one who embraced what was thrown at them and attempted to give to the Church from my lived existence and since has been able to give back to the local Church from my experience nationally.

I said at the start that I had no idea what God wanted me to do. I came to Synod with no baggage and had no formal training in ecclesiastical matters. I was an ordinary member of a local parish. As a result when I was invited, along with all the newbies, to be a member of any of the campaigning groups I declined as I didn't want to be labelled. Someone who was elected with me in 1995 joined all of them! I found my home in the Open Synod Group which seems to me the place where you could be yourself regardless of your churchmanship.

I had a year off General Synod in the year 2000-2001! As you can imagine this came as a blow, if only to my ego! Nudge, nudge!

The role of Secretary to the OSG was offered to me (as a way of keeping in touch with General Synod). Locally, I was invited to be Churchwarden of my Church (after all you're not doing anything else at the moment!). And by the following Autumn I was back on Synod in a byelection. God has a great sense of humour.

I was privileged to be Chair of OSG for 5 years - relinquishing that role when being elected to Vice-Chair of the House of Laity.

During those 5 years I was able, thanks to Roy Thompson who was Secretary, to put together a number of opportunities for people to discuss in a relaxed and open way their opposing views on Women Bishops, Issues in Human Sexuality and many other diverse topics.

Elections 2021

I don't know whether you are reading this as a seasoned campaigner or a fresh enquirer. If the former, you may not have reached this far! If the latter, perhaps I can share with you some of the questions that I have had to answer in my Synod travels.

How should one engage with Synod?

You might think you need to spend the first quinquennium learning the role. Or you might go 'bull at a gate'! I don't think I went 'bull at a gate' but I dived into the things that interested me and tried to engage in the areas about which I knew little. My brother, former Bishop of Chichester, and I, used to travel up to London from his home in Worth (he was Bishop of Horsham at the time) and I agreed not to debate liturgy and he agreed not to debate Pensions! The real answer is to go with what you feel is right for you and aim to make a difference.

What are the consequences of your choice?

The obvious one is how your activity is perceived by your electorate. Normally you have 5 years in which to make a mark and hope you get re-elected. This time it is only 4 years and that might make a difference. You will clearly be sufficiently supported within your Diocese to get on to start with. So know who you are representing.

What does representation mean?

It means being yourself. You are not a delegate and have to make your own decisions. You set out your stall for election. You will be judged by your honesty and your integrity in your beliefs and convictions. Ultimately, though, it is frequently more about listening and forming a considered judgment. Be prepared to accept that, occasionally, you will change your mind.

Conclusion

The Synod I joined in 1995 is a world away from the Synod I leave in 2021. Having said that, it is a world away from where it needs to be. General Synod is clearly rooted in the parliamentary system and its processes and standing orders, until recently, stood it in good stead for a staid orderly progression through change that meant nothing moved too swiftly. It once described as a juggernaut with the motor of a lawn mower. Like an oil tanker it would need a large turning circle. Over the years the processes have changed for the better. There is a greater use of presentations and discussion opportunities and the Standing Orders are now in English!

The Standing Orders are there to ensure that nothing is done without due care and attention. However they had accreted changes due to loopholes and the changes themselves were not always sound. There is a real need to do major reform on them to cater better for the dual role of Synod as both a Legislature and a Debating Forum for Social, Ethical and Political matters.

The latter works really well when people are together in the same place and can have side conversations with fellow members. The pandemic has meant that that was not really possible. Fortunately, it occurred at a time when a lot of legislative stuff needed to be completed prior to the end of the quinquennium.

Legislation, in some instances, needs social interaction in the same way. However, much of what happens in that area can be, and should be in my opinion, carried out using email and Zoom© style technology.

The issue with the Standing Orders that I have mentioned above drives Synod to think binary! It almost forces confrontation.

Over the next 5 to 10 years, Synod will have to deal with many non-binary (no pun intended) issues where the outcome may well provide compromises that fail to be accepted by some. It will have to live with those consequences.

What I will say is that if it drags its heels and hides behind Standing Orders the delay in dealing with some of these issues may well be more damaging than getting it marginally wrong.

I believe that Synod, and the House of Laity in particular, has found its voice on this. It accepted new ways of working to get the Women in the Episcopate legislation through. It has made a lot of changes to enable the church to operate more fluidly through its simplification programme. It has made massive leaps in its ability to motivate and challenge the laity to step up to the mark and for the clergy to be prepared to work more collaboratively.

I am hopeful that further change can happen, can happen quicker than I think it can and can make church a vibrant agency for spreading gospel imperatives into world which has been so chastened by the pandemic.

I look forward to seeing new members of Synod starting they journeys in hope and expectation.

I look forward to seeing the Open Synod Group flourishing as it continues to provide a safe space for people of difference to engage together in the matters that divide them.

I look forward to being nudged again into new activity.!

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