

Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway

Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University 22–23 June 2023

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Briefing Paper: Church of England

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1 Introduction and overview

Synodality is crucial for Anglicanism. Indeed, it could be said that synodality is central to the questions facing all the churches of the Anglican Communion. Within these churches and among them, the core issue is how we make decisions together, which is to say, how communion lived in our relationships becomes expressed in our decision-making; synodality is communion in decision-making mode. All of this always takes place within a mission context, for Anglican churches exist to serve God’s mission within their specific localities, caring pastorally both for those who attend church and those who live within the community that the church serves, most often a parish.¹ This finds deep resonance with the Catholic synodal process, especially as described in the Catholic briefing paper which says that synodality “reveals and gives substance to” two pillars of post-conciliar Catholic ecclesiology: the church as *communion* and the church’s *mission*.² Indeed, the synodal process is said to reflect a ‘tripartite relationship in its theme: *For a Synodal Church: Communion-Participation-Mission*.’

¹ Alongside parishes there are other forms of community, among which are: Cathedrals, churches set up by Bishop’s Mission Orders, and sector ministries and churches that are not parishes. Of these last the diocese of London’s website, for instance, lists eight varieties: 1. Network Churches, including ethnically based churches and youth congregations; 2. Church planting; 3. Fresh Expressions, defined as ‘a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church’; 4. other new ecclesial communities; 5. New Areas of Housing and Major Development; 6. Schools; 7. Chaplaincy; 8. Missional Communities, defined as communities constituted by a specific missional purpose in relation to a network or a place.

See: <https://www.london.anglican.org/mission/non-parish-churches/>

² The briefing document helpfully points out that, in an ecclesial context, communion and mission require each other: ‘Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that *communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion*.’ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988), #32.

1.1. Communion as foundational

Since synodality is rooted in communion and leads to mission it is, in fact, richer than simply a way of making decisions. It relies upon the life of communion in all its facets. This indicates the need for a way of living and also for structures that encourage and deepen communion. For Anglicans it is especially important. Active communion has been foundational to their ecclesial tradition as it emerged in distinction from Rome in the sixteenth century, with its emphasis upon the centrality of the word of God shaping the community, the eucharist as ‘communion’ not a static form of adoration, pastoral clergy, lay involvement, and a developing sense of service to the whole nation.

For Anglicans as for Catholics synodality as lived out is not merely a conversation among people. Among Anglicans, notoriously perhaps, this conversation means, as Archbishop Justin likes to put it, learning to disagree well.³ But ‘walking together on the way’,⁴ as the term ‘synodality’ could be translated, is not simply about sticking together and talking no matter what; it is about discernment within communion. Both the experience of centuries and the Scriptures suggest the need to take counsel together in order to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. At the New Testament’s Jerusalem consultation, the church’s earliest recorded attempt to come to a collective judgment, what was sought was to understand the will of God, hence the letter sent from the consultation says of its pronouncements: ‘For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15:28). That kind of precedent shapes the minds and the imaginations of Anglicans.

1.2. The basis of what follows

In a properly Anglican fashion, in what follows I will be offering not an official statement but just one possible reading of the tradition grounded in its lived experience. I hope it will nevertheless be a fair and perhaps fairly representative reading. I shall focus upon the Church of England because the local context is particularly relevant to our symposium. Of course, the peculiar role within the Anglican Communion of the Church of England, which till now has functioned as a mother church for the churches in communion with the See of Canterbury,⁵ means that what is said of the Church of England will shed light upon the other forty-one churches of the Communion.

³ ““Disagreeing well” is a controversial phrase. Shortly after I used it for the first time (I have no doubt it does not come from me in the first place, but I picked it up somewhere), I was firmly criticized on the grounds that Christians should not disagree. To which my answer is, “But they do! Incessantly! And who says they should not?”” Justin Welby, *The Power of Reconciliation*, Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition, 2022, p. 198.

⁴ The very same expression is the title of the Third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III) document, using the methodology of receptive ecumenism, that compares the decision-making processes of the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion: *Walking Together on the Way* (London: SPCK, 2018).

⁵ While recent developments around the controversial topic of homosexual relations have led to increasing talk of the possibility of revising this, the Archbishop of Canterbury is still *primus inter pares* among the bishops of the Anglican Communion.

2 Vision

2.1. Key terms

When committed members of the Church of England think of synodality, the phrases that they are likely to think of are ‘bishop in synod’ and the church is ‘episcopally led and synodically governed’. They will most likely think of the General Synod and possibly of the other synods that exist within the church, at deanery and diocesan level. Behind this, more implicit than explicit, there is a consistent theological vision rooted in a sense of a living ecclesial community. It combines the role of the Spirit in personal authority with the role of the Spirit speaking in the assembly of Christ’s disciples, both episcopacy and the whole People of God. Hence ‘bishop in synod’ is a catchphrase that emphasizes that the bishop in his or her diocese does not function alone, but as part (albeit a special part) of a council that includes clergy and laity; ‘episcopally led and synodically governed’ evokes the idea of bishops as executive leaders, even though they are also a part of the legislature in the Church of England’s General Synod—with special functions when it comes to matters to do with doctrine, liturgy, or sacrament.⁶ It is crucial to grasp 1) the importance of bishops as focuses of unity and the form and sign of apostolic life and teaching as it is passed on within the tradition of the Catholic Church, and with them of the role of the clergy, and also to grasp 2) the importance of the laity, who bring their own gifts and charisms, opening the church to those it serves, and without whom it is impossible to hear what the Holy Spirit may be saying to the whole People of God, and who also exercise discernment through their sense of faith, the *sensus fidei*, which, as the Catholic briefing document points out, is ‘given to all baptised believers’, and which in its corporate exercise becomes the *sensus fidelium*.

2.2. Walking together with the nation

It is also crucial to recognize that the vision for the Church of England encompasses service to the nation, both in the sense of the local communities which the church serves and in the sense of the life, structures, policies of the nation of England at national level. It is easy to miss just how important this is. In the Anglican vision it is not merely a matter, as it is sometimes expressed, of unspecified and ominous ‘Church-State collusion’, but of evangelizing a country. While the particular arrangement of the Church of England with regard to the State is not replicated elsewhere in the Anglican Communion, the sense of service to the whole community is a constant feature of Anglican Christianity: Anglican churches are national churches, locally grounded within their societies, principally in parishes but also in other forms of community.⁷ This is not a claim that other churches do not do the same, but it is to explain the Anglican vision of seeking to be inculturated or contextualized in particular societies, while striving to serve everyone, not just the Christian community. When the Church of England speaks of itself as the national church, this contextualization means it has been established by law and is entrusted by the State with the spiritual care of the nation, a role that brings with it rights and limitations, both in offering spiritual services to people (often jocularly referred to as hatches, matches, and despatches) and also in bringing the spiritual dimension of the community into the law-making process through the presence of bishops in the House of Lords, with the

⁶ These are stipulated under Article 7 of the Constitution of the General Synod of the Church of England.

⁷ For the Church England these are nearly always linked to worship, that is, a parish church, parish centre of worship, cathedral church, guild church or, in the case of a Bishop’s Mission Order, any building licensed for public worship by the bishop.

concomitant involvement of the State in senior ecclesiastical appointments.⁸ The vision of synodality, therefore, brings with it this concrete, national perspective of Christianity present in, as it were, the warp and weft of the nation, a nation whose voice is to be heard in the process of discerning what the Spirit is saying.

2.3. Historical grounding

Behind this lies history. First, the initial vision for the English church at the time of the Reformation was of a mutual indwelling of State and Church and was expressed very strongly by Richard Hooker:

We hold, that seeing there is not any man of the Church of England but the same man is also a member of the commonwealth; nor any man a member of the commonwealth who is not also of the Church of England ... no person appertaining to the one can be denied to be also of the other.⁹

The ideal has never been fully realized, but it has been formative throughout the centuries. Second, rooted in the initial vision of the State informed by the Church, institutional provision for the church was established, under the authority of the ‘godly prince’, that is, the monarch, by parliamentary Acts. Prince and Parliament are crucial historical elements. They mean that the voice of the laity has always been involved in the decision-making processes of the church with its distinct identity as it emerged in the sixteenth century.

3 Synods, Structures, and Style

3.1. A question of style

The Catholic briefing paper, using the language of the Roman Catholic Church’s International Theological Commission, speaks of three elements of decreasing importance: style, structures, and synods. From an Anglican perspective, the last two of these are in effect collapsed into one another as the Church is structurally synodal at every level. The matter of style is crucial, far more than the word itself might suggest. Style is about how communion is lived. Healthy ‘style’ is essential for healthy structures and synods; while structures and synods are necessary to have a properly functioning, institutional way to practise and make effective that ‘style’. Nonetheless, historically the Anglican focus has been more upon structures and synods than on style. Certainly the desire, clear in *The Book of Common Prayer* (BCP), is for a well-order society where people live a ‘godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of Thy [God’s] holy Name’,¹⁰ but the virtues and practices necessary for building a living community that walks together have tended to be assumed more than emphasized.

⁸ Other churches could also call themselves national churches because they extend across the nation and seek to evangelize it. A church like the United Reformed Church has indeed also been established by law. It does not, however, have the same relationship with the State as does the Church of England.

⁹ *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book viii, Ch I, 2.

¹⁰ From the General Confession at Morning and Evening Prayer.

Even so, the context of community is ever present, both in the awareness that, as the BCP says, ‘we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son’¹¹ and that the understanding that the word of God, in the reading of the Scriptures and the church’s preaching, takes place primarily in the communal context of the church’s liturgical celebrations. The Church of England’s experience is one of being ‘church’, gathered in one body especially offering common forms of worship, however many different strands of theological interpretation there may be within that one body. This desire to encompass difference while living and walking together as a united community is fundamental, even though there are many times when difference can in fact become dissention.

3.2. Processes and Structures

Anglicans for the most part experience their church at ground level. It would probably be true to say that in the main they tend to be only dimly aware of anything beyond what they experience within their immediate community, although the keenest may go on to experience the delights of deanery, diocesan, or even General Synod. Nonetheless, the same theological principles are at work at every level, namely the mix of listening to the Spirit via personal authority, always related to episcopacy either in the person of the bishop or in clergy in communion with the bishop, and listening to the Spirit via the whole body of the church, including especially the laity who bring with them their non-ecclesiastical but deeply needed talents. The workings of these listening structures are often thought about in terms of checks and balances. Sometimes this kind of thinking can be misleading when it is forgotten that synodal processes are not a democratic enterprise but an attempt to understand the mind of Christ by hearing the voice of the Spirit. When the focus is dislodged from its spiritual and theological base, at any level, the meetings become as any other committee can be, dreadfully dull if not downright antagonistic. When a proper degree of Christian charity prevails, however, these meetings can feel like a foretaste of heaven, with the most diverse array of voices contributing to growing understanding. These are moments when it can be truly said that what is experienced feels like an appropriation of Jesus’ promise: ‘Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I among them’ (Mt 18:20). Many, sadly, will be able to speak about the disasters, some will have tasted the presence of the Lord in church gatherings. Much of the time, however, it may simply feel like reasonably cordial interactions, all very polite, but not a meeting with a tinge of heaven. Yet the opportunity is always there.

Given that most people experience the church at the closest local level, a schematic presentation of the workings of structures that express synodal processes in the Church of England can helpfully begin at the most local level.

The Vestry and the Annual Parochial Church Meetings are held every year. The Vestry meeting embodies the important principle of service to the whole community because anyone, believer

¹¹ From one of the prayers of thanksgiving following communion.

or not, living in the parish and registered to vote in local government elections may be present and vote at it. In reality the presence of anyone other than churchgoers hardly ever happens. The Vestry meeting has only one function, to elect Church Wardens who are meant to be assistants and friends of the Parish Priest and clergy, as well as of the congregation, and have legally defined powers to care for the church fabric, matters of church organization, and to ensure seemly worship—and they have the power to arrest anyone creating a disturbance during divine worship! They are *ex officio* members of the Parochial Church Council (PCC). On the other hand, the Annual Parochial Church Meeting, which usually follows the Vestry meeting, is the main decision-making meeting of the entire congregation. Depending upon the parish, however, it is highly unlikely that a majority of parishioners will attend. Those who vote have to be on the parish's electoral roll, which does not mean that those who are not on it are not considered members of the Church of England since everyone living in the parish may call upon the services of their parish church. The Annual Parochial Church Meeting looks very much like the AGM of any other body, hearing reports, looking at finances, discussing matters of common concern, and of course electing officers, principally the members of the PCC.

The Parochial Church Council in England is a legally required, incorporated body for every parish, which has powers regarding finance, worship, and the conduct of the church's life. The parish's ordained ministers are *ex officio* members, while the majority of the members, usually about a dozen, are elected from lay people who are on the electoral roll. Church Representation rules make it clear that it is possible for members of other churches to be members of the PCC.¹² As such they can also be elected to the deanery synod or the General Synod. The Church of England is not an exclusive club, which also gives a distinctive meaning and flavour to how it practises synodality.

The deanery synod is a meeting of parishes in area that provides local leadership. Among the officers elected by the Annual Parochial Church Meeting are representatives who sit, together with the parish clergy, on the deanery synod. Lay members of deanery synod are also *ex officio* members of their PCCs. The deanery synod has two houses: clergy and laity.

The diocesan synod serves the whole of the diocese. It discusses matters of concern to the diocese and makes provision for those things that require action or a statement. It consists of three houses: bishops, clergy (who are members of a deanery synod, elected by the clerical members of the deanery synods, together with *ex officio* members), and laity (who must be on the electoral roll of a parish, elected by the lay representatives of the deanery synods, together with *ex officio* members).

The General Synod is the main legislative body for the Church of England. In 1919 the Church Assembly was set up as an entirely novel development within the British Constitution, the first instance of devolution of power from the Westminster Parliament. The Church Assembly

¹² The conditions are that they are members in good standing of a church which subscribes to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, that they have habitually attended public worship in the parish for six months, and that they can declare that they are also a member of the Church of England (*Church Representation Rules*, 1(c)).

brought together the Convocations of Canterbury and York, each of which consisted of two Houses: the bishops and the clergy. With the Synodical Government Measure 1969, in line with what had also happened in other churches as they were set up within the Anglican Communion, the House of Laity was added, shifting the primary lay voice at national level from State institutions to an ecclesiastical body. The General Synod of the Church of England, which first met in 1970, is made up, therefore, of three Houses: the bishops,¹³ the clergy,¹⁴ the laity.¹⁵ It has the power to make Measures which have the same force and effect as Acts of Parliament and are binding outside the church, upon, for instance, Government, the Crown and, in some cases, Public Utilities. Measures are given a certain amount of Parliamentary oversight and are considered by the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament before going to the Monarch for Royal Assent.¹⁶ The General Synod also makes Canons which are binding only upon the church and usually only upon clergy. They go directly to the Monarch for Royal Assent without passing through Parliament. The involvement of the State in the church's governance illustrates an important aspect of synodality as lived by the Church of England: the partners 'walking together along the way' include the State. This does not mean that the State dominates or controls what the Church does, any more than the Church rules the State, but it is a way of bringing those who are served by the ecclesiastical institution into the workings of that institution, as happens, in principle at least, at local level in the election of churchwardens by everyone living in the parish.

3.3. A topical example

A topical example of how synodality in the Church of England works is the six-year process, starting in 2017, of the consideration of identity, sexuality, relationships, and marriage, with particular regard to homosexuality, known as *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF). An outline of the journey can be found on the Church of England website.¹⁷ Key to it are the College of

¹³ Made up of all diocesan bishops including the offshore dioceses of Sodor and Man and Gibraltar in Europe; the Bishop of Dover; the Bishop to the Armed Forces; nine elected suffragan bishops, together with six women bishops (to give gender balance) and three Provincial Episcopal Visitors (for those do not agree with the ordination of women).

See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/bishops-information-house-and-college-bishops>

¹⁴ Made up of 'clergy (other than bishops) who have been elected, appointed or chosen in accordance with Canon H 2 and the rules made under it (including deans, proctors from the dioceses, forces and university constituencies, and clerical members of religious communities) together with ex officio members and up to five co-opted members.'

See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/house-clergy>

¹⁵ Made up of 'members from each diocese of the two Provinces elected by lay members of the deanery synods (or annual meetings of the chaplaincies in the case of the Diocese in Europe) or chosen by and from the lay members of religious communities, together with ex officio members.'

See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/house-laity>

¹⁶ That is, after having been agreed by each of the three Houses of the General Synod (usually by simple majority, though specially majorities are sometimes needed), Measures go to the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament which, after meeting church representatives, produces a report declaring whether the Measure is expedient for the benefit of His (or Her) Majesty's subjects. If the Measure is deemed expedient, it is then voted upon by both Houses of Parliament and sent to the Monarch for Royal Assent.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/living-love-and-faith-journey>

Bishops (that is, all serving bishops within the Church of England) and the General Synod. But the entire process has sought to involve the whole church which, in keeping with Anglican ecclesiology (seeing the churches of the Anglican Communion as only part of the Catholic Church), means that other churches have been consulted, the nine with representatives on General Synod as well as the range of smaller churches in the country by means of Churches Together in England. The process of LLF is thus synodal in this broadly ecumenical sense, even though the outcome remains firmly in the hands of the General Synod—so no other church need feel guilty for the Church of England’s possible errors!

Following the publication in November 2020 of the rich and wide-ranging suite of LLF’s both academic and more popularly focused resources, the bishops invited church communities across the country to use them to learn together, as they listened to one another and, above all, to God. It was an encouragement to the whole of the Church of England to share insights, stories, and reflections, attending in first place to Scripture. Indicating the desire to encourage a suitable style of synodal learning, among the materials that have been produced is a reflective essay in a book entitled *Friendship and the Body of Christ*.¹⁸ Of particular note, however, are the six Pastoral Principles which guide the process and attempt to inculcate a genuinely synodal style.¹⁹ They are:

- acknowledge *prejudice* (above all our own pre-conditioning)
- speak into *silence* (giving people the possibility to say what they want however uncomfortable)
- address *ignorance* (understanding faith and Scripture from others’ perspectives)
- cast out *fear* (so that everyone can speak freely without risk of reprisal)
- admit *hypocrisy* (shining a light on practices and processes that force people to hide their gender or sexual orientation)
- pay attention to *power* (so that those with pastoral responsibility recognize their power and abuses may be avoided)

These principles clearly have relevance beyond questions regarding sexual ethics and offer significant pointers for how to conduct sensitive synodal conversations by embedding an ethos of openness, accompaniment, listening, and mutual learning.

The LLF process has thus gone from ‘learning’ and ‘listening’, to ‘discerning’, coming after that to ‘deciding’, and is now at the stage of ‘implementing.’ In other words, unpacking this, the synodal process, having heard the people of the Church of England (and beyond), engaged with the LLF resources, and principally with Scripture but also with the tradition of the Church, brought the bishops in February 2023 to the point of being able to offer their response to General Synod. This has resulted in the formation of three implementation working groups, made up of episcopal and non-episcopal members: the Pastoral Guidance Working Group, the

¹⁸ See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/listening>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/bishops/pastoral-principles>

Prayers of Love and Faith Working Group, and the Pastoral Reassurance Working Group. The outcomes of these working groups will be presented by the bishops to General Synod in July 2023 when it will be decided how to implement the February 2023 decision.

One effect of the LLF process as it moves to implementation is the strain that is put upon the Anglican Communion, with challenges both to the Church of England as, in some sense, the mother church of the Communion and to the Archbishop of Canterbury as *primus inter pares* among the bishops of the Communion and, together with that, the worldwide instruments of communion²⁰ led by the Archbishop. The primates involved in GAFCON (Global Anglican Future Conference) and GFSA (Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches) have already said that they wish to ‘reset’ the Anglican Communion because of the perceived unorthodoxy of the Church of England’s current position that would allow the blessing of people in same sex relationships. How this turns out we shall have to see. But it illustrates that the Church of England does not exist in an ecclesial vacuum worldwide. Synodality also means walking together with the other churches of the Anglican Communion, and this is a challenge.

4 Discernment and Difference

4.1. Theological grounding

Behind the practical ways the Church of England lives synodally is a broader theological approach that shapes how the church collectively takes counsel and makes decisions. The approach can be framed in terms of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888²¹ which, while initially intended for ecumenical use, has since found a life as the expression of the minimal outlines for Anglican identity.²² Taking the points of the Quadrilateral one at a time:

1. ‘The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as “containing all things necessary to salvation,” and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith’ grounds the Quadrilateral. It quotes article 6 of the Thirty-Nine Articles which asserts of Scripture ‘that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man’.²³ Anglican disputes

²⁰ The Instruments of Communion are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference (a meeting all the bishops of the Communion which takes place about every ten years), the Primates Meeting (of the chief Archbishops, Presiding Bishops, Moderators and chief pastors of the Communion’s forty-two autonomous churches, held at varying intervals around the world and chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury), and the Anglican Consultative Council (made up of members of the laity, archbishops, bishops, priests, and deacons, held approximately every three years, with the Archbishop of Canterbury as President though not the chair). See: <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/structures/instruments-of-communion/acc.aspx>

²¹ Lambeth Conference, 1888, Resolution 11.

²² Anglican Communion Office, *Lambeth Conference Resolutions Archive*, 1888: <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127722/1888.pdf>.

²³ See the Church of England website: <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/articles-religion#VI>.

are all, ultimately, disputes about the interpretation of Scripture. Synodal processes are supposed, under the guidance of the Spirit, to come to a better understanding of how to live under the rule of Scripture.

2. The Quadrilateral affirms ‘the Apostles’ Creed, as the baptismal symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.’ The creeds summarize and embody the canon of Scripture as authoritatively sealed within the transmitted memory of the apostolic community.²⁴ To affirm them is both to uphold a trinitarian interpretation of Scripture bound to the ancient tradition of the faith and to uphold a conciliar approach to reading Scripture correctly—for all that the Thirty-Nine Articles’ warn, in article 21, that General Councils ‘may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God’.²⁵

3. The third point of the Quadrilateral is ‘the two sacraments ordained by Christ himself – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord – ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s words of institution, and of the elements ordained by him’. This gives rise to a baptismal and eucharistic ecclesiology where every member, lay or ordained, has a place with his or her specific gifts and charisms,²⁶ fulfilling what is expressed in article 19 of the Thirty-Nine Articles which announces that ‘the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.’ The synodality of the church is made real through worship, grounding it in openness to God.

4. The fourth point of the Quadrilateral is linked to the experience of synods throughout the ages since they have always involved apostolic authority. Without wishing to deny the apostolicity of non-episcopal churches, Anglicans affirm the sign of apostolicity within their own polity in the words of the Quadrilateral which assert the need for ‘the historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and

²⁴ See The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, *Church as Communion* (London: Church House Publishing and CTS, 1988), para. 31.

²⁵ That same article, long before a developed understanding of the role of the laity in councils was enacted throughout the Anglican Communion, affirms the notion of lay involvement in such gatherings when it declares that ‘General Councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of Princes’. After all, it was the Emperor Constantine who called together the council in Nicaea in 325, setting its main agenda. It was held in his palace, and he took an active role in its proceedings. John W. O’Malley indicates mediaeval lay participation in synods: ‘When Pope Innocent III convoked the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, he ordered the emperor, all kings, dukes and various others to attend in person or through a vicar.’ *America, the Jesuit Review*, 17 February 2022: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/02/17/synodality-history-john-omalley-242081>. In the contemporary church there is a vestige of this power of ‘Princes’ in that each new General Synod is inaugurated by the monarch. Lay power is exercised, however, in actual decision-making by the people, primarily in the House of Laity in General Synod but also through the presence of lay people in Parliament.

²⁶ This is both Pneumatological and Christological, seeing the members of the church as empowered by the gifts of the Spirit while they participate in Christ. Via baptism they are incorporated into Christ’s body, through the eucharist that body is nourished. Indeed, in the celebration of the eucharist the whole of the body of Christ is present: apostolic authority rendered personally present by the bishop, or by the bishop’s representative, an ordained priest; the laity with all their many gifts and charisms, and so the presence of Christ in each redeemed believer, ordained or not; the word of God through the reading and preaching of the Scriptures; the sacrament in the elements of bread and wine; the presence of Christ in the midst of those who are gathered in his name.

peoples called of God into the unity of his Church'. Anglicans claim that they have 'continued the episcopal form and sign of succession within the tradition of the Catholic Church'²⁷ as 'an apostolic ministry of oversight in the service of the apostolicity of the Church'.²⁸ As we have seen, within Anglican structures bishops always have a special place in discerning what the Spirit is saying. Nonetheless, their legislative function is exercised only within Synod, which means in concert with the two Houses of Clergy and Laity. Within the Church of England the synodal nature of their role is emphasized by the fact that in their own dioceses, according to the Synodical Government Measure 1969, English law states that it is 'the duty of the bishop to consult with the diocesan synod on matters of general concern and importance to the diocese'.²⁹ Indeed, the personal authority of bishops is never detached from the work of the Spirit in the collegial and communal exercise of *episkopē*.³⁰

The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral is intrinsically bound to listening synodally to the Spirit. It underscores the core dimensions of an Anglican understanding of the synodal process: it is under the supreme authority of and derived from Scripture, affirms the conciliar method for authoritative interpretation and its trinitarian approach, is the consequence of a baptismal and eucharistic ecclesiology that builds up the body of Christ in openness to God and giving weight to the charisms and gifts of *every* member, and recognizes the special role of discernment incumbent upon bishops.

4.2. *Dispersed authority*

This Quadrilateral has an impact upon, and gives structure to, another aspect of Anglican synodal experience, its 'dispersed authority'. Dispersed authority is a way of speaking about how members of the church walk together, in their diversity, differences, and tensions. In Report IV to the Lambeth Conference of 1948, authority is said to derive from a single source, the triune God, and that

It is distributed among Scripture, Tradition, Creeds, the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, the witness of saints, and the *consensus fidelium*, which is the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit through His faithful people in the Church. It is thus a dispersed rather than a centralized authority having many elements which combine, interact with, and check each other; these elements together contributing by a process of mutual support, mutual checking, and

²⁷ House of Bishops Occasional Paper, *Apostolicity and Succession* (London: Church House Publishing, 1994), para. 46.

²⁸ The title of Chapter III of *Apostolicity and Succession*.

²⁹ Synodical Government Measure 1969, 4, 3.

³⁰ *Apostolicity and Succession* para. 48 quotes with approval, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982, 'These three aspects [personal, collegial and communal] need to be kept together. In various churches, one or another has been over-emphasized at the expense of the others. In some churches, the personal dimension of the ordained ministry tends to diminish the collegial and communal dimensions. In other churches, the collegial or communal dimension takes so much importance that the ordained ministry loses its personal dimension. Each church needs to ask itself in what way its exercise of the ordained ministry has suffered in the course of history.' BEM, Ministry, 26.

redressing of errors or exaggerations to the many-sided fullness of the authority which Christ has committed to His Church.³¹

What is described is more a matter of life and experience than a system, having ‘a quality of richness which encourages and releases initiative, trains in fellowship, and evokes a free and willing obedience,’³² and it lacks the order that would be imposed by a single, authoritarian mode of authority.³³ The Report goes on to outline how the elements of dispersed authority are in organic relation to one another in a version of its own Quadrilateral as it presents the religious experience of ‘Catholic Christianity’ as: *described* in Scripture, *defined* in Creeds and in continuous theological study, *mediated* in the ministry of Word and Sacraments, *verified* in the witness of saints and in the *consensus fidelium*.³⁴ In the fourth element, significantly, its different perspective shifts attention from bishops to the people.

Seen in the light of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, the richness of dispersed authority is not a spiritual free-for-all, however much Anglicans very publicly disagree. A similar pattern is reflected in what the Lambeth Commission on Communion says in *The Windsor Report* of 2004 about theological discernment in communion.³⁵ *The Windsor Report*, in addition, spells out more fully the function of the vital element of reception by the *consensus fidelium*, and so gives weight to the role of the people in the fourth point of the Quadrilateral structure.

4.3. *The emerging pattern*

This fourfold structure is synodal in a deeper and more nuanced sense than simply taking decisions together since decisions grow out of a communal life in Christ. It is key to the process that, within communal life, decision-making hinges upon Scripture in an order that rests, in its final point, upon both the episcopate and the *consensus fidelium*. As ecumenical thinking about authority has also noted,³⁶ reception by the *consensus fidelium* is critical to the process of recognizing whether a council’s pronouncements are true,³⁷ even though agreement by the faithful does not confer truth; it acknowledges it. This gives rise to the normative pattern of synodality described by the Windsor Report:

- (i) theological debate and discussion

³¹ *The Lambeth Conference 1948: The encyclical letter from the bishops, together with resolutions and reports* (London: SPCK, 1948), pp. 84-85.

³² *Lambeth Conference 1948*, p. 85.

³³ Indeed, on the same page the Report bluntly says, ‘Where this authority is to be found mediated not in one mode but in several we recognize in this multiplicity God’s loving provision against the temptations to tyranny and the dangers of unchecked power’. The sense of freedom to have one’s own opinion is core to Anglican experience.

³⁴ See *Lambeth Conference 1948*, p. 85.

³⁵ The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report* (London: The Anglican Consultative Council, 2004), paras. 53-70.

³⁶ See, for example, the discussion of synodality in The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III* (London: CTS, 1999), paras. 34-40, especially para. 36.

³⁷ See *The Windsor Report*, para. 68.

- (ii) formal action, and
- (iii) increased consultation to see whether the formal action settles down and makes itself at home.³⁸

The last point about ‘settling down and making itself at home’ means that in the final period there must be space for dissent, hence minorities who do not agree with the church’s decision must have a protected place. It is typical of the Church of England to strive to do this and, for instance in the case of those who do not accept the ordination of women, to set up structures to support those who do not agree.³⁹ It is an attempt to institutionalize a genuine and open-ended process of reception, where occasions of confrontation can become learning opportunities, while recognizing that a clear decision has been made.⁴⁰

5 Mission and ministry

5.1. Communion and mission

It should be clear from all that has been said so far that the Church of England’s synodal processes are core to its mission to the nation it serves and seeks to evangelize. The Anglican understanding is that mission, communion, and communion’s outworking in synodality are interwoven. As Paul Avis says, ‘The living communion that constitutes the Church of Christ is not a closed communion, turned in on itself, but an open, receptive and hospitable communion, turned towards the world.’⁴¹

³⁸ *The Windsor Report*, para. 68.

³⁹ The three Provincial Episcopal Visitors, the Bishops of Oswestry, Richborough, and Ebbsfleet are an example of this. They do not only have delegated authority to care for those unhappy with the ordination of women in the provinces of Canterbury and York, but they attend and speak at the meetings of the House of Bishops, although they do not vote.

⁴⁰ The five guiding principles that emerged after the Church of England went ahead with ordaining women to the episcopate give an example of how to attempt to live together during the period of reception. They can be summarized thus:

1. Respect for lawful office holders, and specifically women in ministry.
2. Recognition that a clear decision had been made, even though
3. A process of discernment is underway within the universal church.
4. Those unable to receive the ministry of women as bishops or priests are within the spectrum of Anglican teaching and tradition and will be enabled to flourish.
5. Pastoral and sacramental provision for those who cannot accept women’s ordination is without limit of time and is to contribute to the mutual flourishing of those on both sides of the debate.

The House of Bishops provided a Guidance Note on the ministry of women bishops and priests in June 2014. See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/GS%20Misc%201077%20House%20of%20Bishops%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Ministry%20of%20Bishops%20and%20Priests%20-%20Guidance%20note%20from%20the%20House.pdf>

⁴¹ Paul Avis, *A Mission-Shaped Communion*, commended by the Anglican Consultative Council in 2016: <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/219357/A4-UFO-Reports.pdf>, p. 30.

That same open communion works through the application of the Five Marks of Mission as developed within the Anglican Communion.⁴² Starting from *telling* the Good News they encourage *teaching* believers how to live the gospel, in a way that respects Anglican synodal life, which leads them to *tend* the needs of their neighbours, seeking to *transform* political structures and *treasure* the environment. To tell, teach, tend, transform, treasure are ways of summing up the five marks, and each in its own way provides a way of walking together, as a synodal communion, with people in society. It is the ‘missional *koinonia*’ of the International Reformed Anglican Dialogue (IRAD), which leads to ‘radical hospitality,’ a way of life into which Christians are drawn and from which they are sent.⁴³

5.2. Diversity as a goal

The challenge in the view of many in the Church of England, however, is for the church to achieve the same degree of diversity among those working in an official capacity for the church as there is in society. Diversity is seen to be necessary for there to be a culture that is inclusive and inviting to people regardless of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and neurodiversity.⁴⁴ To attempt to build this culture various means are employed. The seven National Church Institutions⁴⁵ (which assist the church’s ministry and mission in a wide range of ways,

⁴² The Five Marks of Mission are:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

See: <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>

⁴³ *Koinonia: God’s Gift and Calling*, The Hiroshima Report of the International Reformed Anglican Dialogue (IRAD), (2020), #43.

⁴⁴ ‘The Church is poorer and less equipped for its mission without the full gifts of all its people being present in its leadership. This creates a lack of diversity of voice in decision-making, a lack of role models, and a lack of welcome. We make poorer decisions if we do not hear from and include people of many backgrounds and disciplines in our leadership structures.’ The Church of England’s 2021 Report, From Lament to Action, p.57.

⁴⁵ The majority of National Church Institution staff are based at Church House in Westminster, Lambeth Palace and the Lambeth Palace Library, and Bishopthorpe Palace near York. Their range of tasks is vast, covering every aspect of the church’s life. They consist of seven bodies:

- The Archbishops' Council (covering, for instance, Vision and Strategy, Faith & Public Life, Ministry Development, Safeguarding, Communications, the Legal Office, the Secretariat – responsible among other things for organizing General Synod)
- Bishopthorpe Palace
- The Church Commissioners
- The Church of England Central Services (HR, Finance, Technology, Data Services, Internal Audit, Giving, Projects, Legal and Communications)
- The Church of England Pensions Board
- Lambeth Palace
- National Society for Promoting Religious Education

in some ways like the Church of England's civil service)⁴⁶ are committed to being an equal opportunities employer, providing equality of opportunity. Their policies and processes supporting diversity are under constant review. The church also has diversity as one of its key strategic goals, and this means setting up bodies like the Archbishops' Commission for Racial Justice as well as programmes encouraging the dioceses to appoint officers, engage in research, and set up relevant programmes.

When a person is considered for ministry care is taken that the whole church community is involved, with references sought ideally from both men and women, lay and ordained. There is a constant need to be aware of the need to challenge the church's culture and to encourage people of UKME/GMH backgrounds to feel able to offer for ministry. National programmes, including the promotion of resources like Racial Justice Sunday, are not always as successful as could be hoped but they are part of an attempt to develop a more inclusive culture.

6 Catholic Learning

It is not easy to say what another church might learn from the Anglican experience. Possibly some things can be suggested, but always recognizing that alongside the positive lessons there will be negative ones.

6.1 The quality of preaching, like so many things, is not so much a question of techniques and practices as a matter of love. In this context, drawing on Anglican experience, love must be twofold: love for the word of God and love for the community. The word is preached well when it is valued for what it is: God coming to us to transform our lives; but also when it is preached within the community valued as the living body of Christ, his presence in the here and now of history. Worship, therefore, is a privileged place to hear the word. In effect this requires a theological awareness that encourages the spiritual practice of openness to communion with the word alongside non-clericalized openness to communion with other people whether lay or ordained, just as the church is open to communion with Jesus in the Eucharist. Practising these three communions would not limit improvement merely to preachers pulling their socks up, but also assist the community in drawing out better communication through their loving attention.

6.2 The full inclusion of women in all aspects of church life within Anglican experience means more than the inclusion of women in ministry, immensely valuable as this has proven to be. It also means the adoption of structures that give greater voice to women. For instance, given that for Anglicans bishops have a key role in the church's decision-making, care has been taken that women's voices are heard in the House of Bishops by including six suffragan women bishops until such time as there is a sufficient number of women present in their own right as diocesans. A structure giving consultative power within decision-taking bodies is always a possibility even when deliberative power may, for theological reasons, for the time being be withheld.

⁴⁶ A useful flow chart, giving an overview of some of the responsibilities that fall to the NCIs, can be found at: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/NCI_structure_chart_May_2023.pdf

6.3 *An inclusive church* is demanded by the gospel, but the Church of England has struggled and still struggles with this. What has been found useful is both structural changes in setting up national and diocesan bodies or posts in the service of inclusion and cultural resources that stimulate different approaches. At the same time, senior church leaders, not least the Archbishop of Canterbury, express penitence for the failings that exist. All of this is part of a shift in mentality that demands considerable spiritual effort. It takes time, and there can be resistance to ‘initiatives’ coming from ‘higher up’.

6.4 *Lay involvement*, however, is a dimension of inclusiveness that Anglicans hold dear, not least because it is required by the theology of dispersed authority. It is, of course, a feature of genuine synodality. While there is no need to abandon the gifts that may go with a single primatial figure like the Bishop of Rome, structures for bringing 1) the personal authority of those exercising the charism of discernment (that is, bishops, but also clergy) can be brought together with 2) the voice of the Holy Spirit in the whole assembly of the faithful. This would suggest structural recognition of the role of the *consensus fidelium* in the reception, and so the confirmation, of what has been understood or decided upon. Such recognition is already present in Catholic theology, but a strong view of the *consensus fidelium* might even indicate finding ways of living communion that avoid the use of coercive power by those in authority, including, perhaps, giving space to loyal dissent. This would be an aspect of ensuring that decision-making power is devolved, in an ecclesiastical subsidiarity, to the lowest, and often most local level.

6.5 *Avoiding self-referentiality* in the experience of Anglicans is best achieved by focusing upon the community we serve. Attention to the needs of the nation or of the local area (however local is defined) is a dimension of mission that fosters spiritual health, and it can be promoted by finding ways of including those who are served in our own decision-making processes. In the case of the Church of England this is achieved by its involvement with the nation, locally and nationally, but there can be other ways of achieving such openness.

6.6 *What is really needed as ecclesial learning*, and not only by Catholics, can be perhaps best be seen in Anglican frailty. Structures of inclusion do not of themselves bring fruitfulness. The essence of communion is relationship; the essence of relationship is love. It is almost as if the Apostle Paul were saying to us that we might have the best structures to articulate synodality, but if there is no love, they are worth nothing. The Anglican experience demonstrates this palpably. Where there is no real listening, insufficient humility to accept that one’s biblical understanding may be mistaken and certainly cannot fail but to be partial, synodality founders. What is needed is a sufficient synodal spirituality.

The heart of such a spirituality can only be the very love that Jesus commanded in his New Commandment to love one another *as* he has loved us (John 13:34; 15:12)—love that has the same quality as the love of Jesus, which is to say cruciform (Philippians 2:5-8). This is the love that builds up the community as Jesus has taught. It is able to see that while our perception of reality may be true, it needs to be enriched by the perceptions of others. And this, in turn, means that as we walk together, keeping company with Jesus as on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:13-35), we will frequently have the surprise of seeing things in a new way as we learn to have a vision closer to that of our divine companion who, in his own person, is the fullness of truth (John 14:6). This spirituality is an enormous topic and deserves scrutiny by any church that wishes to learn how, in reality, to practise synodality.