

CHURCH TIMES

General Synod should be more than a talking shop

by REBECCA CHAPMAN
20 JANUARY 2023

Its members need clarity about who is making decisions and what they are voting on, argues *Rebecca Chapman*



WHEN the [General Synod](#) comes up in conversation, I am often met with flummoxed and frustrated faces: it's just a waste of time, I am told. But I believe that the Synod does matter. What good is an expensive talking shop?

“Episcopally led and synodically governed” was denounced as “a myth” by the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#) last July, as he quoted Lord Chartres: “We are led by bishops in synod. And that is a very, very different thing indeed” ([News, 15 July](#)).

What might this mean in reality? Dr Colin Podmore, a former Clerk to the Synod, has noted that “bishops act not in isolation but in partnership and constant dialogue with the clergy and laity through the synods of the church, and with their consent.” In 2021, the [Archbishop of York](#) reminded us that “Synod means walking and working together on the way.”

There will, no doubt, be conflict and disagreement at next month's meeting of the Synod, perhaps most intensely in debates about human sexuality. Our system of election and representation provides three Houses, of bishops, clergy, and laity, with representation of dioceses, cathedrals, religious communities, universities, and the armed forces. Every voice and every vote matters. Our sinful human nature requires that checks and balances be in place to prevent abuses of power at every level of our shared life. Disagreeing well requires trust and mutual respect: are these present in the General Synod?

LAST July, several of the [written questions](#) published asked why the Synod had yet to vote on

the [Vision and Strategy](#). The Business Committee had not been asked to schedule it, its chair said. Archbishop Cottrell responded that hundreds of lay and ordained people were involved in discerning the Vision and Strategy, and that the Synod's energy should be directed towards "deciding how we turn this into actions". Yet, in a [message](#) to the newly elected Synod in 2021, the late [Queen](#) herself alluded to the expectation that the Synod would consider a proposal "on a vision for the future of the Church".

On the Saturday of the July session, the Synod voted on the spending plans of the [Church Commissioners](#) and the [Archbishops' Council](#). Introducing the item, the chair, Geoffrey Tattersall KC, said: "These are plans developed in the light of Vision and Strategy."

Archbishop Cottrell explained that "we're not voting on carrying on doing what we're doing. We're voting on learning from what we've done and doing it better." The Vision and Strategy had already been "agreed by a gathering of every bishop and diocesan secretaries", he said.

That evening, the Revd Marcus Walker, a redoubtable member of the House of Clergy, asked again when the Synod would debate and approve the Vision and Strategy (for which £1.2 billion has been promised, and the target of establishing 10,000 new and predominantly lay-led churches set). This, Archbishop Cottrell said, was a decision for the Business Committee. No mention was made of the spending-plans vote that had taken place a few hours previously.

November brought more [written questions](#), with two further replies on the matter from Archbishop Cottrell. He noted that the Vision and Strategy was built on past Synod resolutions, going on to say that "most decisions and action will take place" in dioceses and parishes, aspects being brought to the Synod for update and consultation. The message seemed to be: the Synod is for discussion; dioceses are for decisions. Is this enough to provide the consent of which Dr Podmore spoke?

The second answer was more worrying. When it was asked when specifically the Synod had approved the Vision and Strategy, the response was that it had been in July 2022, when the Synod approved the spending plans of the Church Commissioners and the Archbishops' Council. Seemingly, we knew not what we did. . .

Where was the mutual respect and trust here? Or when Mae Christie's written question was met with the reply that there was no record of the date or the mechanism by which *Issues in Human Sexuality* was formally written into the Selection Criteria, and this information "could not be obtained within the time-frame available"? She was later ruled out of order when asking for it to be removed, if there was no evidence for its legitimacy. Five months on, we do not seem to have had clarification about how it got there, nor whether it will be reconsidered.

ALL this makes rebuttal far harder when I am told that the Synod is a waste of time. If we are led by bishops in the Synod, then what might leadership look like? Getting the Synod to agree to something through obfuscation and dissembling, making it unclear quite what we are voting on, and a lack of follow-through to genuine questions — is this leadership? In 2021, GS2239 highlighted the challenges for bishops’ “complex and contested” national leadership, but also their disengagement from the Synod “to attend to other high priority work”. Trust in our church leaders has been eroded during the pandemic; we need transparency and truth to rebuild relationships. And prayer.

Please pray that our Synod debates are constructive and collaborative; may we now have clarity and transparency. But may we all keep our eyes peeled, regardless — because blink, and you might miss a Synod motion being carried. If it was ever really there. . .

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