



COMMENT

Response to ‘Reflections on the Workings of General Synod’

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There is much to address in responding to such a rich and thoughtful range of reflections as given by Bishop Pete in his article published in the previous pages of this *Journal*.¹ I was asked to respond to that paper from a theological perspective as part of the Ecclesiastical Law Society’s 2022 day conference, and this comment piece has been based substantially on that response. So many areas of theological relevance are raised by Bishop Pete: the nature of authority in the Church of England, the role of the bishop, the shortcomings of the synodical process and the legal framework for evangelism.

Bishop Pete offers some very interesting ideas for the improvement of the operation of General Synod. He rightly notes that General Synod is primarily a legislative body. Some of his practical ideas for improving drafting by a series of revision committees of opponents to move forward on legislation seem sensible, and one way forward would be to engender a committee system like Parliament itself, where much of the best work happens unseen. These committees could meet virtually. Then there might be time on the floor for proper informed debates rather than the soundbites he describes.

Another way forward, which speaks also to his concerns about the role of the bishop, might be to move to a wider conciliar model for matters of high doctrinal importance. A council could be held with all the bishops, all Anglican theologians (of whom there are a formidable collection of which the Church generally makes little use), as well as lay and clerical representation. On

1 P Broadbent, “Reflections on the Workings of General Synod” (2023) 25 Ecc LJ 19–31.

something as important as gender and sexuality, which have huge theological implications, that seems to me the appropriate way forward. Other matters could be discussed as part of Synod business but with more time. The problem with Synod and its difficult issues at present is that being a legislative body, it seeks legislation and actions for topics where that might not be the most helpful way forward. This is the case with safeguarding failures of the past, for example, and part of the reason recommendations on racial justice have not been implemented is that they arise out of a desire to be seen to act and legislate on such an important question rather than whether they would be useful or effect change. Synod is far too eager to legislate and have an opinion on everything. This is not to say that Christianity does not impinge on the matters of the day for as C S Lewis famously asserted, 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.'² There is no need, however, to behave as if General Synod *were* the Houses of Parliament.

Some of Synod's problems and tendency to see itself like this are the result of establishment, so that Synod functions as a quasi-parliamentary system, which encourages party behaviour. It also leads to grandiose ideas of bishops acting as if cabinet ministers with portfolios rather than people, as is evident in the proposals for bishops with no see but a quasi-cabinet specialism, such as bishop for Brexit or COVID. Establishment also makes the location of authority complex. The Church has elements of monarchical government in the House of Bishops and also in the supreme governorship of the anointed sovereign, who upholds the constitution of the Church. Before the Church Assembly, Parliament was the Church of England's democratic lay authority and one rather more representative of the ordinary lay Anglican than members of the General Synod are today. At the local level, before freehold was abolished, the incumbent had more authority, but still holds the cure of souls. I would like to agree with the vision set out at the beginning of Bishop Pete's article but supplement it with the words of that doughty episcopal supporter, Ignatius of Antioch: 'you must not engage in any activity apart from the bishop, but be subject also to the presbytery as to the apostles of Jesus Christ' 'for your council of elders ... is so attuned to the bishop as cords on a lyre'.³ Authority is not dispersed so much as participated hierarchically, as the bishops share in the *episcopate* of Christ, the clergy participate in the *episcopate* of their bishop in holding the cure of souls or presiding at the eucharist and all of us, lay and clerics alike, share in the divine life through our baptism/confirmation and hold the *sensus fidei* together. We have to say Amen as a

2 C S Lewis, 'Is Theology Poetry?' in *They Asked for a Paper: Papers and Addresses* (London, 1962), 165.
 3 Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Trallians* 2, 2 and *To the Ephesians* 4, 4 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol 1, ed and trans B D Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA and London, 2003), 259, 223.

whole body if any of this episcopal authority is to be exercised, just as our amen at the eucharist is essential. As Ignatius writes: ‘each of you should join the chorus, that by being symphonic in your harmony, taking up God’s pitch in unison . . . you may partake of God at all times.’⁴

The Governance Review Report has implications for the relation of the central to the local, and the diocese to the parishes, which, I would claim have always been bound up together since the time of Ignatius when some presbyters were sent to serve the parochial, as Allen Brent’s ground-breaking research has shown.⁵ We need to have a dynamic understanding of how the shepherding of the bishop is shared locally through the incumbent’s cure of souls. For there can be no diocese without parish communities at a level where people can learn charity and reconcile and are known and cared for. The diocese is the parishes. The principle of subsidiarity, by which decisions are taken at the lowest possible level, is not just part of Catholic Social Teaching but also Anglican thought from Hooker to William Temple, whose support for the central welfare state was tempered by a guild socialist influence that could make him write:

Liberty is actual in the various cultural and commercial and local associations that men form. In each of these a man can feel that he counts for something and that others depend on him as he on them. The State which would serve and guard Liberty will foster all such groupings.⁶

Episcopal oversight should also be fostering the local and the subsidiarity principle is of direct relevance to protecting the role of the bishop from too much archepiscopal control. Recent proposals to choose a new Archbishop of Canterbury from the whole Anglican Communion smack to me of incipient papacy, while the new umbrella administrative body sucks power ever more centrally.⁷ If the new governance proposals lift some burdens to enable some bishops to relate more closely to their people that will be good. I fear we still load them with bureaucracy, taking them further away from teaching and pastoring while the cure of souls in multi-parish hubs similarly removes the priest ever further away. This is so ironic at a time when new civil parishes are being created and keeping local will be the way to survive as a nation and a

4 Ignatius (note 3), *To the Ephesians* 4, 223.

5 A Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Martyr Bishop and the Origin of Episcopacy* (London, 2007). Irenaeus of Lyons, in a letter from the early second century, speaks of the parishes of Rome. See *The Church History of Eusebius*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, ed P Schaff and H Wace (Edinburgh, 1997), Book 5, xxiv, 243.

6 William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London, 1976 [1942]), 70.

7 *See of Canterbury: Membership of the Crown Nominations Commission Consultation Document*, available at <www.anglicancommunion.org/media/465888/Consultation-Documents-to-the-Membership-of-the-CNC-for-the-See-of-Canterbury_2201_en.pdf>, accessed 27 September, 2022.

Church in the decades ahead. The governance review's account of subsidiarity does not inspire confidence, relying on a management guide: '*Appropriate levels of subsidiarity* – adding value to the cure of souls at local level by recognising and delivering those activities best done nationally to maximise strategic or economic value'.⁸ The marketing language applied to the cure of souls itself is chilling, while subsidiarity here is invoked to justify ever more centralised control.

Yes, we can all agree the shape of the centre needs reform and the bishops should not feel they need to run everything, least of all behave like the cabinet. Even the Vatican has introduced lay people to run the Curia but the language of the report does not acknowledge episcopal leadership theologically in my opinion, describing it as 'spiritual', when there is nothing beyond the 'spiritual' in any area of our lives. Words like 'sacramental' are notably missing from the definition of episcopacy here and any local loyalty is seen as inimical to the national interest, or not being 'on message'.⁹ But as a Church we really need to do less and say less. There is little sign whatsoever of being simpler or humbler save in having fewer committees. And we could have fewer still. Why have a nominations committee? Now the Crown has delegated nominations why not devolve the system and invite the whole diocese to meet the episcopal candidates in the cathedral and question them as they do in Sweden? And vote. That really would be a conciliar *consensus fidelium*!

The first part of Bishop Pete's article acknowledges the breakdown of Ignatius' ecclesial unison in a loss of trust between bishops and their clergy and people during the pandemic and as a result of various measures such as the proposed changes to the Mission and Pastoral Measure. The Save the Parish Network of which I am a supporter is the fruit of this breakdown, since GS 2222 proposals on church closures remove levels of consultation and appeal.¹⁰ More people wrote to comment (almost universally negatively) than for any other synod green paper ever, shocked by the failure of participation.¹¹ What demoralised clergy about the prohibition on going into their churches during lockdown was that no acknowledgement was made of their canonical duty to ring the bell and say morning or evening prayer in the church.¹² The bishops

8 *Governance Review Group Report*, GS 2239, 13, available at <<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/Governance%20Review%20Group%20Report%20FOR%20PUBLICATON.pdf>>, accessed 20 August 2022.

9 *Ibid.*, para 98, 22.

10 See the full proposals at <<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/GS%202222%20-%20Mission%20in%20Revision%20-%20A%20Review%20of%20the%20Mission%20and%20Pastoral%20Measure%202011.pdf>> and the critique at Save the Parish of 'The Church Closer's Charter' at <<https://savetheparish.com/2022/02/02/gsi312/>>, accessed 18 August 2022.

11 *Mission in Revision: Review of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011 Consultation Analysis*, GS Misc 1312, available at <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/GS%20Misc%201312%20MPP%20review%20update.pdf>, accessed 27 September 2022.

12 See Canon B11.

could have invoked Canon B14A which allows non-performance of this duty with the bishop's permission for a good reason. It was as if the bishops (aside from those in London) did not realise that saying the office was what clergy did. It can feel as if the whole ecclesial and liturgical order of the Church of England is breaking down and our archbishops ceasing to guard our faith and law or acknowledge the participated *episcopate* of the clergy or the participation of the laity, who have pastoral reorganisation imposed upon them, with little say in their future.

The question of ecclesiology is picked up later on in Bishop Pete's article, where different models are laid out. I would agree with the bishop that all are correct (although article 19 of the 39 *Articles of Religion* is about the visible church only) but also would argue that *all* are necessary. One of our deepest problems in this crisis is that we lack connectivity. 'Body' is not just a metaphor but a metaphysical reality: we are Christ's body on earth and most ordinary people in parishes did not assent in any meaningful way to the mixed economy/ecology, although they are already the people running the most common 'new worshipping community' model—Messy Church—and could easily embrace an outreach project to a new estate as part of normal parish life. The theologian Anderson Jeremiah pointed this out in an article in the *Church Times*: 'some of the core driving factors of "mixed ecology" are still driven by "mixed-economy" principles, such as the emphasis on success, multiplication, and growth. As the wider debate points out, some advocates of mixed-ecology church have clearly stated that some of the "limiting factors" (an economic expression) are impediments to the success of the Church.'¹³

A body cannot have competition between its hand and its ankle yet that seems to be the rule now. Millions are spent by the Strategic Development Fund resourcing a single church with ten staff, while next door ever greater hubs of parishes led by fewer clergy remove any relationality or effective cure of souls.¹⁴ The Church of England has always had diverse ecclesial views within it but formerly a shared liturgy and the parochial system held it together. I recall when Christian Union Sunday worship in Cambridge was attendance at BCP Morning Prayer at the Round Church. If, as Bishop Pete claims, there is now no shared ecclesiological model around which we can unite in our practices and our ordinal we are no longer a church at all and we will not evangelise effectively because what we are is what we preach. Yes, one can be hospitable to a range of chaplaincies, mission initiatives and guild churches

13 Anderson Jeremiah, 'Mixed-Ecology Church: Why Definitions Matter,' *Church Times*, 23 July 2021, available at <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/23-july/comment/opinion/mixed-ecology-church-why-definitions-matter>>, accessed 19 August 2022.

14 Church Commissioners, *Independent Review of Lowest Income Communities Funding and Strategic Development*, available at <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/IRLS%20-%20ofinal%20report%20%28%29.pdf>, accessed 27 September 2022.

but the centre cannot hold with two wholly disconnected rival parallel systems, not to mention the way that the Holy Trinity Brompton brand operates as a separate entity. The so-called mixed ecology lacks a vision of the interdependent cooperative relations between the systems and will therefore wither, as vine branches unconnected to the whole. Christ's mission cannot fail but the Church of England certainly may without any vestige of real interdependence, which Richard Hooker vividly described as 'inherent copulation'.¹⁵

Readers of this *Journal* do not really require a 'theological perspective' to an examination of church polity. This is because church polity is already a theological concept: the canon law that gives stability and the polity that orders our life and directs it to God are holy things. But if we are a sacred polity, we need as much participation and connection at every level of our common life as possible. Rather than try to manage a doubled number of rival ecclesial structures, we should reconnect and intensify the *koinonia*—the spiritual fellowship—of the church and include in that our keeping to her laws. As Hooker writes 'without order there is no living in public society ... the very deity itself both keepeth and requireth ... this to be kept as a law, that wherever there is a coagmentation of many, the lowest be knit to the highest by that which being interjacent may cause each to cleave unto other and so all continue one'.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, The Works of ... Mr Richard Hooker with an Account of his Life and Death by Isaac Walton*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1845), vol 1, V, lvi, 2 (622).

¹⁶ Hooker, *Laws*, VIII, ii, 3 (495).