

COGS Highlights



Council of General Synod

Saturday, June 13, 2020

Members of the Council of General Synod (CoGS) gathered together online at 11:30 a.m. EDT via Zoom conference.

Opening Prayer

The Rev. Louise Peters led an opening worship service.

Primate's Remarks

Archbishop Linda Nicholls, Primate of the Anglican Church Canada, began her remarks by noting that the last CoGS meeting in March had been held on the cusp of widespread lockdown measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that CoGS members immediately each went into self-isolation. The primate said that no travel would take place before 2021, noting the postponement of events such as the Lambeth Conference and the next Sacred Circle. Consecrations of bishops have been delayed, or done with minimal participants and broadcast online. New ways of working meant that the House of Bishops had met by Zoom in April.

The primate's own work has changed dramatically due to the pandemic. Instead of travelling across Canada and overseas, she had been confined to London, Ont., for the last 12 weeks. At the same time, she had the chance to look at other ways of gathering: using video conferencing technology to meet with clergy, youth ministry teams and military chaplains, and recording greetings and messages for Anglicans outside Canada. Archbishop Nicholls has taken care to stay in touch, meeting every two weeks with metropolitans across the country and helping Church House staff manage changing

conditions.

"One of the things that COVID-19 has done is that it has broken up some of the moments of resistance we've had to changing what we've always done," the primate said. "It's broken open new ways of being the church." She cited the affection Anglicans can hold for buildings as an example and said that experiences during the lockdown had shown that "we're church wherever we are."

Though the reaction in early weeks was one of grief at developments such as not being able to gather in person for Easter worship, the church had subsequently experienced a "quick learning curve" of putting everything online and learning new skills. In some cases, technology had allowed people who might not attend a church service in person to access worship online. The primate highlighted Indigenous Ministries for its online activity, which included hosting gospel-based discipleship three times per week and its recent online gospel jamboree, emceed by National Indigenous Archbishop Mark MacDonald.

Though there have been some upsides of time apart during lockdown—with a deepening of relationships and of prayer life—it has also affected the economy and church resources, Nicholls said. Government subsidies have helped cushion the blow, but it is difficult to foresee what the church will look like in one or two years. The primate suspected it would be a mix of online activity and smaller in-person gatherings. Moving forward in this context may

prove challenging, but the primate found it “encouraging to see that God’s church is capable of change and doing things fresh and anew.”

Nicholls noted changes in staff within the primate’s office, with Principal Secretary Paul Feheley recently concluding his ministry in that position after 16 years of service. She also said that the search for a new general secretary had been delayed partly because of COVID-19, but that current general secretary Michael Thompson had “graciously offered to continue” in his position until August 31.

Meeting Technology

The Rev. Monique Stone, co-chair of the Planning and Agenda Team, explained use of Zoom and how council members could ask questions. She described how votes would be taken through polling questions onscreen. CoGS took a test vote, then voted to approve the agenda of the current meeting.

How CoGS Will Work

Stone described plans for how members would conduct the business of CoGS while lockdown is still in place. The idea is to hold council meetings online with one-day sessions on a more frequent basis, likely every six weeks.

March Meeting Recap

Prolocutor Karen Egan gave a summary of the last meeting of CoGS in March. With some significant absences at that meeting, she hoped to get everyone caught up. Much of the previous meeting focused on the work and responsibilities of CoGS, as well as its aspirations going forward.

Governance Working Group

Chancellor David Jones provided an update on work of the Governance Working Group (GWG). Following his report at the March meeting of CoGS, he had made the same presentation to

the House of Bishops, which then formed a small committee to consider the discussions for a review of church governance structures. The GWG itself had met the Wednesday before the current meeting of CoGS and prepared a memo which sought guidance from the council on how to move the project forward.

For GWG, the organizing principle for the project should be how the national church can govern itself effectively, and what provisions in its constitution and rules of procedure add value to the work it does as a corporate body. In reflecting on what possible changes might be made, the GWG grouped them into the following categories:

- Changes to the membership of General Synod;
- Changing methods of voting on different issues; and
- Changes to operating rules of order and procedure.

Making changes in one area, Jones added, could impact how other provisions work in practice.

Council members took turns to ask questions and make comments. One member noted that the church should clarify why there may be a need to change its governance structures in the first place. Jones then put forward polling questions for CoGS members:

- Is CoGS committed to the project of considering and deciding on proposals for change to be taken to General Synod 2022 and 2025, given that whatever changes are proposed will need to be adopted using the current amending formula?
- If so, does CoGS agree that the next step is for GWG to prepare tentative possible motions to focus the discussion and

identify whether there is sufficient agreement to move forward from there?

Large majorities of council members voted “Yes” to both questions.

Each member then answered nine more polling questions to give some idea to the GWG about the priority of various proposed revisions. Results suggested that the areas of highest priorities for members were “putting the Rules of Order and Procedure into plain language” and “a revision to the ‘bands’ or ‘tiers’ that determine the number of clerical and lay members a diocese is entitled to send to General Synod.”

Council members took a break from 1:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Dismantling Racism

Archbishop Nicholls recalled how she had made anti-racism a focus for CoGS at its meeting in fall 2019. She did not know at the time why she felt called by the Spirit to address racism, but said in light of recent events, that focus may have been prescient.

The primate referred to ongoing popular protests against anti-Black racism that had exploded across the United States and around the world following the death of George Floyd and other Black Americans. In Canada, she said, there is much racism against Black, Asian, and Indigenous people. But systemic racism can be difficult to see for those who may have benefitted at the expense of others.

Dismantling that racism, Nicholls said, is work that will continue. The primate expressed optimism that the anti-racism working group—which was formed by CoGS years ago but had “fallen into a bit of a quiet space” of late—might be reinvigorated. She hoped people with lived experiences of racism and anti-racism

work might help to create change at all levels of the church.

At the November meeting of CoGS, the primate recalled, Episcopal Church representative Noreen Duncan and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) representative Pat Lovell had raised the fact that aside from Indigenous members of the council, there were no other people of colour on CoGS besides them. While she did not think anyone made a deliberate choice in that regard, Nicholls said, she believed that it “says something that the vast diversity of our church does not find itself reflected in our governing bodies.”

As primate, Nicholls had received emails from many Anglicans describing racism they had experienced in the church, which she called heartbreaking. The church must take such allegations seriously and act on them, she said. The primate commended the Episcopal Church for taking leadership in fighting racism in the United States. As a sister church, the Anglican Church of Canada must take similar action in challenging systemic racism at home. She invited council members to bring that focus back to their dioceses.

General Secretary Michael Thompson introduced a presentation by General Synod Archivist Laurel Parson, who Thompson said was “chiselling away at the great granite face of racism” through her work decolonizing descriptions and records in archives.

Parson said that this work of General Synod Archives reflected its commitment to “truth-telling and reconciliation with all races and nationalities in Canada”—including First Nations, Métis and Inuit—by responding to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While General Synod Archives has

preserved and made available records related to ministry of Chinese and Japanese people in their homelands and in Canada, she said, its largest collections are Indigenous materials.

In responding to its commitments, the church has continued to make available records found in its collection “to acknowledge the right of Indigenous people to know the whole truth about what happened—and why—in regards to human rights violations committed against them in residential schools.” Citing UNDRIP Article 13, Parson said the church was committed to describing all library and archival material so that Indigenous people could find their own histories and cultural materials by using their own names for communities, places and persons.

General Synod Archives has an extensive collection of materials that highlight writing systems, literature and culture of Indigenous peoples in places such as northern Ontario, northern Manitoba, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Nunavik. It plans to describe these materials appropriately and make knowledge of them more available by cataloguing them into its online databases.

As examples, Parson showed archival items made by priest and missionary Herbert Girling in the early 20th century. These included photos and linguistic aids documenting what Girling referred to as the “Copper Eskimo” people. These records now have been updated to refer to “Inuit” rather than “Eskimos”, while the “Copper Eskimo” language is now referred to as the Inuinakton or Inuvialuktun language. However, both old and new labels remain in the archive descriptions to make materials easy to find. Changes are being made in consultation with Indigenous people and by working with resources from other organizations responding to the Calls to Action, such as the University of Alberta.

Decolonizing descriptions, Parson said, is a “big project” and she thanked Indigenous people for their “grace, understanding and patience.” The primate and various council members in turn thanked Parson for her work.

Strategic Planning Working Group

Judith Moses, chair of the Strategic Planning Working Group (SPWG), and fellow member Ian Alexander presented a report on the group’s work.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the SPWG had had to shift its plans, setting aside its original intention for surveys and in-person group consultations in March. Instead, the group’s proposal for CoGS was now to step back and “listen carefully, intentionally and respectfully to Anglicans during this difficult time” through a series of national deep “listening sessions” planned with specifically targeted groups. The objectives of these listening groups are:

- to hear from key groups in the church about how things are going at this time;
- to share with each other what current experience suggests about the future of Canadian Anglicans;
- to inform ongoing reflection and discernment about strategic directions for the national church; and
- to offer pastoral support and embody the national church’s convening, connecting role.

Moses and Alexander laid out an approach in which listening sessions would begin in July. Small online groups would ask open-ended questions, share stories, engage in respectful listening, and seek to “identify positive potential to be carried forward into a transformed future, from the present moment.”

They described the methodology of the listening sessions, which would involve groups of 8-12 people from sectors representing the life of the church (e.g. bishops, executive archdeacons, cathedral deans, lay youth and young families, finance officers, etc.) who would meet once or on multiple occasions over the next few months. Each group would make notes of their meetings and send them to the SPWG, which would “debrief” CoGS on emergent themes and patterns and discern next steps before making recommendations at the November council meeting.

These listening groups are currently in various stages of formation and recruitment. Janet Marshall, director of congregational development in the diocese of Toronto, has been engaged as a trainer and overall facilitator. A training session for “chief listeners” and note takers is scheduled to take place on June 26.

Three polling questions were put before CoGS members:

1. Do you like this idea?
2. Do you think this is the right approach for the times we are facing?
3. Are there any groups missing [from the list of potential listening groups]?

The first two questions saw 100% of council members voting “Yes”. For the third, 26% of members identified missing groups which they would email to Alexander.

The primate thanked Moses and Alexander for their presentation, and offered her gratitude to the SPWG for creative thinking and adjusting its direction to listen deeply to the church.

“This is a wonderful, creative moment for the church.... We’re standing in the fog [of the pandemic], and we have a chance to do something radically new,” Nicholls said. The

primate expected to hear good ideas in the process of listening to the church, but wondered if the process would be complete by 2022. She suggested that the present triennium would go down in history as a “triennium of transitions”.

General Secretary’s Report

In his report to CoGS, General Secretary Michael Thompson said he was glad at being able to have more opportunities to be with members of the council. He expressed gratitude for the hard work of General Synod staff members.

Thompson noted that the national church had used various means to cushion the economic blow from COVID-19 on staff members, from taking advantage of federal wage subsidies to asking staff to participate in a work-sharing program should it become necessary. The lack of staff travel during lockdown, he said, had substantially reduced costs, as had lower distribution costs for the *Anglican Journal* after asking readers to confirm their subscriptions. Many dioceses have made a “sacrificial commitment” to fulfill their 2020 contributions to General Synod as much as possible. For these reasons, Thompson believed the national church would make it to the end of 2020 without significant financial impairment. However, he added, 2021 was more of a concern.

The general secretary put forward a motion designed to set aside additional money for reserve funding. In the current moment, he added, the church was learning a great deal about new ways of working. The possibility of shorter, more frequent meetings of CoGS might keep members more aware of the work entrusted to them. He thanked members for their willingness to work in a new way.

Members voted and the motion was carried.

Resolution

That this Council of General Synod support the suspension of the terms of reference of the Ministry Investment Fund for one year, and allow the entire amount available for allocation to MIF projects to be recorded as income in the 2021 budget.

Primate's Closing Remarks

In her closing remarks, the primate thanked staff members for helping keep the meeting on track with technology. Given that this was the first CoGS meeting to be conducted via Zoom, a "debriefing" would follow to see what might be improved upon. Council members would receive an evaluation form following adjournment. Video conferencing, the primate said, would be the council's manner of meeting for at least the next six to seven months.

Noting the hard work of clergy and bishops across the country at this time, she hoped that members would find time to rest during the summer. The next two CoGS meetings are tentatively scheduled to take place on July 25 and Sept. 12.

Closing Prayer

Louise Peters led a closing prayer. The primate concluded the meeting with a blessing.

The council meeting adjourned at 4 p.m.