

COGS Highlights



Council of General Synod

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Members of the Council of General Synod (CoGS) and National Church Council (NCC) gathered at 8:45 a.m. at the Queen of Apostles Renewal Centre in Mississauga, Ont.

Strategic Planning Working Group

Ian Alexander, a member of the Strategic Planning Working Group (SPWG), invited CoGS to make suggestions on a mission statement for the new strategic plan.

Council members put forward ideas in a plenary discussion specifically focused on the mission of the Anglican Church of Canada, using the existing mission statement and Five Marks of Mission as a starting point. A gradual shift in focus to the mission of General Synod will take place later in the strategic planning process.

Suggested changes included more focus on discipleship; capturing the three pillars of scripture, tradition and reason; and ensuring accountability. Members expressed a desire for the mission statement to be succinct and to keep the feedback process going.

Prayers for creating the new strategic plan followed. Archbishop Linda Nicholls, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, said that there was much the SPWG would have to digest in studying feedback. Given the amount of time between March and their next meeting in November, there may be opportunity for CoGS to be called upon to engage this work in some way.

Governance Working Group Feedback

Table groups engaged in discussion on a memorandum presented the previous day by the Governance Working Group (GWG), which concerned a review of General Synod governance structures. Groups wrote down feedback on notes that were then forwarded to members of the GWG.

Members took a break from 10:15 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.

Closing Eucharist

CoGS and NCC members held a closing Eucharist in the chapel. Archbishop and Primate Linda Nicholls delivered the sermon.

At the end of the service, members walked outside singing towards a tree planted as a symbol of the full communion relationship between the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). The primate and ELCIC National Bishop Susan Johnson led a prayer around the tree. They expressed thanks for the growth of both the tree and the ongoing full communion between the two churches, and hope that God would continue to bless and nurture relationships "among us and around us."

Members broke for lunch from noon to 1:15 p.m.

Green Shoot Moment

Marnie Peterson, founding priest of St. Brigids in downtown Vancouver, shared the third "green shoot" moment of the meeting. St. Brigids is a ministry of Christ Church Cathedral that identifies as an "emerging, affirming

LGBTQ-affirming Christian community in the Anglican tradition.” Peterson presented a video about St. Brigids that depicted various members of the congregation and the life of their community. One member who came from a conservative evangelical background described how St. Brigids had given them a “second chance” in the church after they came out as trans.

The primate thanked Peterson for sharing the story of St. Brigids. She pointed to the need to hear about more “green shoots” from other parts of the church, and encouraged CoGS members to find those stories so Anglicans could rejoice with them. With the church pondering how to renew and deepen its discipleship, Nicholls suspected that there were plenty more hopeful stories out there.

Anglican Bishops in Dialogue

Andrea Mann, director of Global Relations, presented a report on the Consultation of Anglican Bishops in Dialogue, suggesting it offered a fourth “green shoots” story of the meeting.

“Anglican Bishops in Dialogue is a green shoot in the Anglican Communion’s commitment towards reconciliation,” Mann said. She presented a video showing the progress of the dialogue over the last decade after bishops in 2010 agreed to meet each other every year. Footage from previous meetings included interviews with Canadian and African bishops, in which African bishops discussed being moved by the words of their Canadian counterparts in clarifying positions on issues such as same-sex marriage.

The clip presented was a “penultimate” version of the video, Mann said, which would later be expanded to include footage from the forthcoming Lambeth Conference. Given the positive reactions from bishops who have

attended the consultations, there was a widespread hope that the meetings would continue. The next meeting of many participating bishops will be at Lambeth, where an evening slot has been secured to facilitate more conversation among those who have attended the Consultation of Anglican Bishops in Dialogue.

As one of those who has attended the consultation, Primate Nicholls shared some of her own experience. Especially from African bishops, the primate said, there was agreement and recognition that finding the resources to continue meeting was the main challenge. But these bishops have said that ongoing dialogue is critical for building relationships. A key development Nicholls saw from the consultations was the ability to move past misinformation that bishops had about each other that was being shared on social media. “When bishops sat down ... and said ‘This is what’s happening in my area and this is the context I’m working in,’ people began to realize that when they talked about mission, they were talking about same thing, but with different contexts and needs.”

In response to a question about whether most conversation at the dialogue revolved around marriage, the primate answered in the negative. Each consultation had its own theme and a keynote speaker from the host community. While there was some discussion around marriage, the majority of the dialogue involved bishops asking each other what was happening in their dioceses. The consultations had led to the building of warm friendships and invitations among bishops to visit each other’s dioceses.

Reflections

Four members of CoGS offered reflections on their experience of the meeting.

Luke Gobbett, youth member from the Province

of Rupert's Land, gave the first reflection. At this meeting, council had talked a lot about the future of the church. Speaking as a young man looking forward in his life, Gobbett said, the future can be scary. The shrinking of the church, monetarily and in membership, can be demoralizing. But if he returned home and told members of his congregation that CoGS had talked only about the death of the church, they would not be happy and this description would not be accurate.

In reality, council members had spent much of their meeting focused on the future, such as in hearing green shoot moments. Gobbett quoted that morning's gospel reading: "The fields are ready to harvest." Saturday night's strategic planning had highlighted what is important to all CoGS members. Former primate Fred Hiltz's apology for spiritual harm says much about what is important to the church. Historically, Gobbett said, the church "hasn't always been the good guy. But I'm happy to be among people who are happy to make amends." Part of the baptismal covenant is that whenever human beings fall into sin, they turn to God. Gobbett expressed gratitude for being able to meet with his Lutheran brothers and sisters. "I'm skeptical that the Anglican Church and Christianity is fading," he concluded, "because our God is a faithful God."

The second reflection came from Murray Still, CoGS member for the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples (ACIP). He was grateful for the presence of young people at the meeting and having had many moments to meet and talk about their different backgrounds and understandings of God. Still noted that five members of the Indigenous community had planned to attend CoGS, but the COVID-19 outbreak had curtailed those plans. He wondered how the pandemic might affect their work together starting on Monday. Throughout the meeting he had prayed for those at home.

In the absence of Indigenous members during the ACIP presentation, Still expressed thanks to Bishop Joey Royal and Indigenous Ministries Coordinator Ginny Doctor for helping to provide some perspective about the experience of Indigenous Anglicans since the last CoGS in November. After the current meeting, ACIP planned to encourage people in their communities to learn about the apology for spiritual harm so they can learn what was lost. Many elders at home had forgotten in large part what preceding generations had taught them for centuries, and which was lost as a result of colonization, residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. If Anglicans can remain in conversation and talking to each other in a way that is respectful, as had been the case with conversations on LGBTQ and marriage issues, "we can see those green shoots in our Indigenous communities began to surface as well, and hopefully bring those stories back."

Dale Drozda, youth member for the Province of British Columbia and Yukon, provided the third reflection. Now in her second triennium on CoGS, Drozda has become "well-seasoned" in having difficult conversations. One thing she found useful were respectful listening activities, which CoGS had engaged in during the last triennium. At the current meeting, she found herself most enriched by conversation around questions presented by ACIP, and the call for CoGS members to continue engaging their home communities on the apology for spiritual harm.

The ongoing discussion on proportional giving, Drozda said, might be a good opportunity to look at how power is distributed within the church. In moving forward, the church could look at the Arusha Call to Discipleship and ensure that Anglicans worship a "God of justice and grace at a time when many worship the false gods of market systems." Drozda is happy

to be on CoGS again this triennium and to go home and share the council's good work with the Province of B.C. and Yukon.

Bishop Joey Royal, member for the Province of Rupert's Land, offered the fourth and final reflection. As a resident of Iqaluit, Nunavut, he had travelled far in order to attend CoGS. Royal said that there are many differences between his home community and the location of the council meeting in Mississauga. In the North, he said, there is an absence of trees. People think differently, use different languages, and their priorities are sometimes different. But, he said, "our God is the same. We worship the same God in the north as you do in the south ... We are brothers and sisters in Christ. That is something big and important."

Once, Royal said, he had asked Bishop Andrew Atagotaaluk about the process of translation. Bishop Atagotaaluk had previously translated the Bible into Inuktitut—a version that is currently being revised for a second edition. In his response, Atagotaaluk said that some parts of the Bible, such as the psalms, are more difficult to translate than others. Another issue is that certain terms are difficult to capture in another language. The word "grace," for example, has no equivalent in Inuktitut. Instead, he had translated "grace" as "God's kindness that enables you"—a definition of grace that Royal said would be hard to improve upon.

In many ways, he went on, the church has been talking about God's kindness this week. As CoGS examined matters such as governance structures, underneath these discussions ran the question of relational dynamics between Anglicans in the church. At a recent ecumenical gathering, Royal recalled, someone had asked a panelist, "How are Christians supposed to overcome differences?" The panelist said in response, "There is no way to do that short of laying down our lives for one another." As

members begin the hard work of CoGS, Royal in his prayers is asking God, "How can I lay down my life for you?" and he invited fellow council members to ask the same question.

Key Messages/Word to the Church

As is customary at the end of CoGS, council members put together a list of key messages for the Anglican Church of Canada on the content and tenor of the meeting:

- Lots of hope
- Commitment to education on what it is that the national church does and how
- Renewed commitment to anti-racism
- Commitment to have the hard conversations, in relation to money and resources as well as LGBTQ issues and marriage
- Commitment to transparency
- Need and desire for all to take responsibility for the strategic plan
- Acknowledgement of the novel coronavirus outbreak and its impacts
- Gratitude for being together with the Lutherans
- We are here to stay (re: 2040 and reconciliation)

Acting General Secretary's Report

In his report, acting general secretary Peter Wall expressed gratitude to CoGS members for being present, acknowledging the difficulties and concern that had accompanied organization of the current meeting in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Wall thanked staff members at General Synod for their hard work. He said that the church has a bright future, and part of that is wrapped up in its current primate, whom he praised for her tireless work ethic. With the search underway for a new general secretary, Wall said that the person to occupy that position would need "all of your support and kindness. I look forward to

hearing about that person and seeing this bright future unfold.”

Challenges remain for the future, however, and much of that revolves around resources, i.e. money. The church is full of generous and wealthy Anglicans, Wall said, and is lucky to be supported the way it is. General Synod must continue to invite that kind of support. He noted that the building currently occupied of General Synod staff is showing great signs of stress, and staff members may need to move elsewhere in the long-term future. Wall said that the current meeting of CoGS had been a good one and that serving as acting general secretary had been an “enormous privilege.”

Primate Nicholls thanked Wall for his report and said it had also been a privilege to have him step into such a challenging leadership role. She agreed it had been a good meeting, but that now it was time to head home and many members would be heading into challenging circumstances. She asked them to pray for each other, and to let General Synod and public health officials know if anyone present came down with symptoms associated with COVID-19.

Adjournment

CoGS ended with members saying the doxology together.

Members adjourned the meeting at 3 p.m.