

COGS Highlights



Council of General Synod

Saturday, September 12, 2020

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

Opening Remarks

Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, welcomed council members and introduced support staff. A motion to adopt the agenda was carried.

In her opening remarks, the primate noted a number of episcopal elections in the coming months. By her calculations, as of January 2021 the church will have seen almost half the membership of the House of Bishops change, which Archbishop Nicholls called "an enormous transition of leadership for our church." She asked for prayers for bishops who would be taking office in such challenging times. Many incoming bishops cannot visit places in their dioceses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even consecration has proven a challenge, with different areas of Canada maintaining different standards for masks and isolation measures.

Churches that have begun in-person worship again have faced similar challenges regarding distancing and masks, the primate said. Many have maintained online worship for parishioners who are unable to attend in person or who have significant fears about doing so. The primate sought prayers from the council for all those across Canada who are trying to adapt to new ways of doing things, and for clergy and parish teams preparing worship and discerning what is right for their communities.

With schools reopening, Nicholls asked members to pray for parents of school-aged children and youth who face enormous pressure trying to decide about whether to send their kids to school. In many cases, parents do not have much of a choice due to economic factors beyond their control. The primate asked members to pray for government leaders and health officials who face pressures to make significant decisions affecting public health. She asked them to pray for young people exhausted with isolation measures who might be ignoring rules for social distancing at parties, bars and universities. With COVID-19 infections increasing in communities, the primate expressed sympathy for youth who are facing such a difficult situation.

Church House, she added, continues to adapt. General Synod staff members are still working primarily from home, and the building itself remains closed to visitors.

Opening Worship

The Rev. Louise Peters, chaplain, led an opening worship service. Worship was built around the theme of "tradition and change."

Peters cited a reflection by the Benedictine nun and theologian Joan Chittister from her book *Songs of the Heart: Reflections on the Psalms*. "Change tests tradition," Chittister wrote. "Any tradition that can't absorb change could not have been tradition in the first place."

Council members prayed for those who had recently died; for churches that were scheduled

to reopen on the coming Sunday; for clergy, wardens and bishops; for school staff, custodians, and all those impacted by the reopening of schools, as well as those who are homeschooling.

Introduction of Alan Perry

The primate said she was delighted to welcome the Ven. Alan Perry to CoGS as the new general secretary. Perry officially took over the position from his predecessor Michael Thompson on Sept. 1, bringing with him degrees in theology and art as well as a master's degree in canon law.

"It's really a privilege to have been appointed to serve in this new capacity," Perry said.

Describing Thompson as a good friend, Perry noted that the outgoing general secretary had set a high bar for the position. Having participated in every General Synod since 1998 and served as a member of CoGS from 2001 to 2004, Perry referred to himself with good humour as a self-identified "synod geek." In addition to the degrees identified by the primate, Perry noted his background as a math major and 10 years' experience in his youth programming computers for a living.

Since taking over as general secretary, Perry has visited the office at Church House. He declared to CoGS that building relationships was his top priority and that he had been meeting with the primate, chancellors, officers, and committee chairs. Perry had enjoyed these meetings and said that the church was served by "an excellent group of people, both staff and volunteers," who brought with them a great deal of knowledge and experience.

At the moment, Perry is still residing in Edmonton but plans to move to Toronto as soon as his wife finds a job there. For now, he will be commuting to Toronto for the first week of every month, which coincides with meetings

of the management teams. "I'm really looking forward to diving into the work of CoGS," he said. Perry compared CoGS to a naval vessel in which each person plays an important role to make the mission a success. He expressed his gratitude to the planning and agenda team and every member of CoGS for their contributions.

Governance Working Group

Chancellor David Jones provided an update to CoGS on the ongoing review of governance structures by the Governance Working Group (GWG). He recalled that at the June meeting, CoGS had organized possible changes into three categories: changes to the membership of General Synod, changes to the thresholds for voting on different issues, and changes to operating rules and procedures. Council members were asked to assign priorities in each of these areas. At its July meeting, CoGS had focused on tiers, bands, and determining the number of clerical and lay members each diocese is entitled to.

The majority of CoGS members (74%) at the last meeting supported keeping the current basis for determining the number of elected members relative to the population of dioceses, while 60% of members wanted to keep General Synod at its current size. A strong 83% of CoGS favoured "spreading out" the 20 dioceses that are currently ranked in the bottom tier—dioceses that have the minimum number of clerical and lay delegates (two of each). This would entitle each of these dioceses to more of such delegates. However, Jones noted that such a move posed a "conundrum" for the GWG, since it would contradict the desire of council to maintain the current size of General Synod.

Jones sought to follow up on these questions while also examining two other components of General Synod membership: youth members and the size of the Order of Bishops. The current plan of the GWG is to make a

presentation at the November 2020 meeting of CoGS addressing voting thresholds and rules of order and procedure. Following the November meeting, the GWG will gather the data and offer specific proposals to CoGS the following March. The way CoGS deals with those proposals will in turn determine what the council will send to General Synod 2022.

To offset the increase in size of General Synod by offering lower-tier dioceses more delegates, Jones offered three possible solutions. One would be to increase the number of delegates the largest dioceses are entitled to. Another would be to include youth members as part of diocesan representation rather than as additional members. A third possibility would be to reduce the size of the Order of Bishops.

Jones said that concerns had been expressed about the number of bishops and their role at General Synod. However, many remote areas and those involved in Indigenous ministry had indicated a need for new bishops. These discussions pointed towards a need to determine whether bishops should automatically become members of the Order of Bishops at General Synod. Jones compared the Order of Bishops to the Order of Clergy and the Order of Laity. Unlike bishops, he pointed out, Anglican clergy and lay members do not automatically become delegates to General Synod by virtue of their position within the church.

Jones put forward a number of survey questions to CoGS, asking them which of various models they preferred and to rank them in terms of preference.

Members took a break from 12:25 p.m. to 12:40 p.m.

Governance Working Group (cont'd)

Council members split into breakout rooms to

discuss the GWG proposals.

Members broke for lunch from 1:35 p.m. to 2:35 p.m.

Survey results for the GWG proposals were still coming in after lunch. As a result, final survey results would be emailed out to members following the council meeting.

Final poll results indicated that the leading priority for CoGS members was spreading out the dioceses in the current bottom tier. Keeping a minimum of two clerical and two lay delegates from each diocese ranked second, and keeping General Synod the same size was the lowest priority. Additional poll results included the following responses:

- "Does CoGS accept the increase in the size of General Synod in order to spread out the 20 dioceses in the bottom tier and to keep the 2 + 2 minimum for the number of elected clergy and lay delegates from each diocese?" 48% voted Yes, 52% voted No.
- "Does CoGS wish to consider changing the youth delegates from being additional delegates to being included as part of the elected diocesan clergy and lay delegates?" 54% voted Yes, 46% voted No.
- "Does CoGS wish to consider changes to the membership of the Order of Bishops?" 87.5% voted Yes, 12.5% voted No.

Bible Study

Council broke into preassigned groups for Bible study. Members read and discussed Ezra 3:8-13, which describes the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem by the Israelites following their return from exile.

The primate thanked Louise Peters for organizing the Bible study and described the passage as “good for where we are” as a church.

Strategic Planning Working Group

Janet Marshall, a congregational development consultant who has worked across the country in different capacities for the Anglican Church of Canada, joined Strategic Planning Working Group (SPWG) co-chairs Judith Moses and Ian Alexander to present an update on their work.

Moses and Alexander credited Marshall for playing a major positive role in helping organize the work of the SPWG. They outlined their work plan for the strategic planning process, which has three major phases:

1. Where are we now? Where are we going?
 - Listening groups and other activity
 - Report to CoGS November 2020
2. Exploring themes
 - Engage provincial synods and other groups
 - Through 2021
3. Identifying values and priorities
 - Moving towards General Synod 2022

The SPWG is currently in Phase 1, which will take it through fall 2020. In answering the questions “Where are we now?” and “Where are we going?”, its main tool thus far has been the listening groups organized across the church. Other activities in Phase 1 include diocesan strategic planning snapshots, a long-range resource outlook, obtaining a mandate and functional analysis from the General Synod office, and surveying other national church models internationally.

The objectives of the listening groups are to hear from key groups in the church about how

things are going “during this unique time”; to share with each other what their current experience suggests about our future as 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. The listening groups’ methodology is based in a broad, “open” approach that focuses on active listening rooted in Scripture and prayer. Each listening group has two co-facilitators in the form of SPWG or CoGS members who listen and take notes.

Representatives from each listening group presented feedback to CoGS from meetings thus far. A list of listening groups and their current status follows:

- Bishops: first meeting to take place in September;
- Executive officers: met in July and August, one more coming;
- Young clergy: met Sept. 3, next session Oct. 1;
- Indigenous church: met July, next meeting September;
- Lay youth/families: members being finalized;
- Social justice: met Sept. 3, more to come;
- Congregational development: three meetings set for September and October;
- Diocesan councils: met Sept. 3, more to come;
- Communications: met in July, more to come;
- Finance: met in July, won’t meet again;
- Council of the North: met Sept. 2, more to come.

While each listening group expressed unique concerns, some common themes emerged.

Groups recognized that a “return to normal” was not possible in such tumultuous times, but that the church would need to adapt. Anglicans noted that the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting upheaval had led to a need for rapid change, and expressed pride that the church had quickly risen to the challenge in areas such as its shift towards greater use of online communication. The groups also highlighted the need for Anglicans to come together, to draw from their rich traditions even as the church embarks on great changes, and to trust in God.

Listening group sessions are set for completion by mid-October, after which co-facilitators will meet to identify main themes and prepare for “major engagement” with CoGS in early November. Other Phase 1 activities will follow the listening groups. The SPWG representatives put forward survey questions to the council to garner feedback on their work. Responses would be collected after the meeting. These questions included:

- Are we on the right track?
- What are we missing?
- What do you need to know?
- What other advice do you have for us?

The primate thanked everyone involved in the listening groups, especially CoGS members who are co-facilitators and who helped organize the meetings. She praised the benefits of such conversations which helped express what was going on in the life of the church.

Key Messages

Rather than splitting into groups to think of key messages to convey to the church coming out of the meeting, CoGS stayed together to discuss how they conveyed messages to people. Council members noted how they took their experience to CoGS to various bodies such as provincial synods and diocesan coordinating

councils. They also discussed their understanding of their own roles as members of CoGS.

Closing Remarks

Archbishop Nicholls thanked everyone at CoGS for taking time out of their Saturday to come together for these discussions. Matters such as the ongoing work of the GWG and SPWG, she said, are “really key to going forward as the church and it’s really important that you’ve all been here to listen and participate.”

She asked the council to remember members of the church who had recently died, as well as clergy and lay members who are currently dealing with high stress levels. On a lighter note, the primate noted that Sept. 9 was International Buy a Priest a Beer Day, and that if council members had not yet done so—and acknowledging that not all priests drink beer—“you can be nice to them in other ways.”

Closing Prayer

Louise Peters led council in a closing prayer, once more highlighting the themes of tradition and change. She recalled the words of Jesus that “No one puts new wine into old wineskins ... New wine must be put into fresh wineskins.”

In their prayers, members gave thanks for the gift of their time together. They placed their trust in God’s spirit, wisdom and love to help those who are anxious and under stress, “those who are facing into new beginnings and uncertain futures ... those who grieve and who long for the promise of hope.”

Council prayed for the new leaders in the church and for the lost, “that they may be found.” They prayed for God to bless them as they left, “that we may be beacons of your light and love for the world, and that your Anglican Church of Canada may continue to grow and deepen in its understanding of your will for its

future and its ministry and mission.”

The primate wished CoGS well for Thanksgiving and said that they would see each other again in November.

The council meeting adjourned at 4 p.m.