

Introducing
Reimagining the Church
A Primate's Commission on Proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st Century

“This commission *Reimagining the Church--Proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st Century*, is invited to think creatively about the life of our church and ‘reimagine’ the structures we need for the future, primarily at the national level though recognizing the interconnectivity with provincial and diocesan structures. The recommendations from the commission will be brought to General Synod 2025.”

-Archbishop Linda Nicholls, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2019-2024

What is this Primate's Commission?

Formed in May 2023 by Archbishop Linda Nicholls tasked *Reimagining the Church-Proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st Century* to think creatively about the life of the General Synod and identify areas of interest and concern within the organization that should be examined in the years ahead.

What is General Synod? The term “General Synod” is used in a variety of ways:

- General Synod is an aspect of the governance of the Anglican Church of Canada. Founded in 1893, the General Synod is a way that Canadian Anglicans identify shared aspects of common mission and ministry.
- General Synod is a meeting, usually held once every three years, comprising three orders: bishops, clergy and laity representing the dioceses and territories of Anglican Church of Canada. In between meetings, the Council of General Synod and committees oversee and implement national and international work.
- General Synod has an office (“Church House”) with a staff team to carry out the work authorized by the General Synod.

Why has this Commission been formed now?

Archbishop Linda Nicholls, in her letter mandating this Commission, wrote: “Over the past several years questions have emerged about the shape of the life of the Church that will best serve vibrant, healthy parishes and our commitment to being the body of Christ across provinces, nationally and internationally in the Anglican Communion. These questions need to be considered with care and theological reflection, so that the structures of our Church life will best serve the gospel.”

Demographic statistics indicate an aging and declining church. Previous patterns of church life and ministry are shifting, and the shape of both ordained and lay ministry are changing. All around us social patterns are also in a state of flux. And yet, we perceive God at work in new and creative ways that invite the church to experiment with new models of ministry and collaborate in new partnerships. The Anglican Church's connection with Indigenous peoples is on the cusp of a new relationship with the self-determining Sacred Circle, even as the work of

reconciliation reveals deeper systemic inequities for mission and ministry that need to be addressed. We have a national church structure and model of governance created in a very different time and context. If we were to develop a national church today – what would we imagine? Where are the gaps? Where are the needs given the available resources? Emerging demographics? What alternatives do we see? What, if anything, can be shed?

As an indicator of institutional decline of Canadian Anglicanism, dioceses across Canada report financial instability for parishes to sustain full-time or part-time stipendiary ministry. Dioceses are struggling to meet multiple responsibilities locally, regionally, and nationally. Some dioceses are unable to contribute to General Synod apportionment for places where ministry is essential but not self-sustaining. These contributions, which are declining while costs continue to rise, represent the bulk of the General Synod’s income.

Are other parts of the Anglican Communion facing similar challenges?

Yes. In a recent article in *The Living Church*¹, the newly elected Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church said this, “So, yes, the church is in decline, in terms of our numbers. Given the hand we’re dealt, given the situation as it is, given the state of Christianity, given the demographics of our various regions — how do we most effectively participate in this mission that we’ve called ourselves to? I don’t know if it’s about helping us to decline gracefully, as much as it is to rethink the whole enterprise, particularly the way that we do it.” (*Emphasis added.*)

How was the Commission authorized?

This Primate’s Commission was formally mandated by the Council of General Synod in 2023. The Primate’s authority to create a Commission is defined in Section 41(a) of the General Synod Constitution: “The Primate...may, at any time, appoint a commission, composed of any number of persons, whether members of the General Synod or not, for the purposes defined in the resolution or instrument of appointment; such commission to report its findings and recommendations to the Primate, the General Synod or the Council of the General Synod, as directed in the resolution or instrument appointing such commissions.”

Who is on the Primate’s Commission?

Appointed by Archbishop Linda Nicholls

Chair: Monique Stone (Ottawa)

Members: Jasmine Chandra (Fredericton), Rhonda Waters (Ottawa), Nick Pang (New Westminster), Sarah Kathleen Johnson (Ottawa), Dion Lewis (Montreal), Peter Elliott (New Westminster), Cole Hartin (Fredericton/Texas), Kyle Wagner (Nova Scotia/PEI).

¹ https://livingchurch.org/news/news-episcopal-church/sean-rowe-i-see-significant-changes-2/?fbclid=IwY2xjawEGQD5leHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHf3VXU6eGXVH1eeRPUpYofUz7j3R318vKNQ17Sn3_XGxOo3yUvrw3lkdAA_aem__1GaStVqYTwormaMzuxiLw

The Commission notes, with regret, that its membership does not include people from Rupert's Land Province, nor the Council of the North and nor an indigenous person from Sacred Circle.

What is the Commission doing?

The Primate's Commission is facilitating focus groups to discern where there is energy for change. The Commission will write a report to General Synod 2025 based on responses from the following groups: House of Bishops, Council of General Synod, Sacred Circle, Management Team and Church House Staff, Council of the North, Provincial Synods/Councils, and members of General Synod (2023). In these focus groups, 7 intentionally provocative hypotheses will be discussed. After each group, participants will receive a Google Form asking for their personal input on each of the hypotheses and their overall thoughts. Further research and development of implementation strategies will take place in a second phase of work, during the 2025-28 triennium.

What are the assumptions that the Commission brings to its work?

The foundational principles taken by the commission are the baptismal covenant as found in the Book of Alternative Services and the Transformational Commitments adopted by General Synod 2023:

- Invite and deepen life in Christ.
- Champion the dignity of every human being; work to dismantle racism and colonialism.
- Embrace mutual interdependence with the Indigenous church (Sacred Circle)
- Nurture right relationship among people of faith in local, national, and global communities and networks.
- Steward and renew God's creation: protect and sustain the earth; pursue justice for all.

We believe that the primary purpose of the Anglican Church of Canada is to communicate the good news of God in Christ. The structures of the Anglican Church of Canada were created to serve the needs of a bygone era. We understand the church's mission is expressed primarily in local contexts. The General Synod, in its various manifestations exists to support of the work of Provinces, Dioceses, Territories, Parishes, and Ministries. We are prioritizing questions of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. We see this simultaneously as a gospel imperative and as a response to the history of an institution that has privileged the voices of an educated, older white professional class. We recognize that the lack of diversity among key stakeholders is both a symptom and a cause, further entrenching systems of oppression and injustice. We have asked ourselves: who is not in this room, or any room within our church? How are people invited in? Can our structures handle other ways of being and knowing?

What does the Commission think the work and responsibility of General Synod is?

We understand the work and responsibility of the General Synod to be primarily Connecting, Convening, and Communicating.

- **Connecting:** The General Synod *connects* communities across the broad expanse of the church. When the church meets in General Synod it is a gathering place where local expressions of the Body of Christ encounter other members of the same body. One of the primary tasks of the General Synod is the facilitation of networks of relationship both within

and beyond the Anglican Church of Canada. This includes sharing resources among Dioceses and local groups, enabling the exchange of information and ideas between the centre and the periphery and facilitating the exchange of information and ideas bilaterally. The General Synod also has a role to *connect* Anglicans in Canada with global bodies in the wider church: the Anglican Communion, the World Council of Churches, and other international bodies. Also, General Synod has a role to *connect* the Anglican Church to other national bodies including the Canadian Council of Churches, Interfaith dialogues, bilateral ecumenical and interfaith relationships, as well as *connecting* Canadian Anglicans to federal government and other bodies where a national presence and voice is important.

- **Convening:** General Synod has a role to *convene*. The General Synod's governance structure *convenes* Canadian Anglicans for meetings in Councils and Committees. Consultations, encounters and events are *convened* from time to time on matters of particular interest and importance.
- **Communicating:** General Synod is in the business of *communicating*. This involves sharing information from local churches and sharing stories of Canadian Anglicans beyond the institution. It is grounded in the Gospel, which is the Good News of Jesus Christ. We believe that every *communication* vehicle should enable the Anglican Church of Canada's greater participation in the Gospel. The General Synod also holds national archives –a repository of the history of the church nationally.

Has the Commission been formed primarily because of issues of funding?

Finances are an indicator that there are institutional issues to be addressed, and that the status quo cannot continue. Good governance requires a clear, direct and demonstrable connection between the policies and priorities (as determined by General Synod and its Council) and the operations of General Synod (as directed by the Primate and General Secretary through the structures of Church House.) Assuming that the goal of the General Synod is to enhance the proclamation of the gospel, Commission members wonder how effectively governance is aligned with operations to achieve this goal. We are aware that many General Synod structures have not been reviewed or changed in some time.

Is the Commission seeking to address issues of Governance or Operations?

Both. Governance is the process of setting objectives and making decisions that guide people toward achieving those objectives. Operations is doing the work and organizing day-to-day activities within the constraints defined through governance. In healthy and effective organizations governance, finance, and operations are aligned to achieve identified purposes and goals. The Primate has identified the purpose of the General Synod is to proclaim the gospel and has asked the Commission to re-imagine how best to fulfill that purpose.