

Our Common Life

Introduction

This document is designed to support and resource the series of diocesan forums planned by the Bishop's Council / Standing Committee for the late Summer of 2014. It may be used, if helpful, in any subsequent meetings of congregations or Councils at local level. The aim is to generate as wide a discussion as possible about important aspects of our common life within the diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf. The forums are being held for a number of reasons.

- In 2016 the diocese will be 40 years old and this is a suitable peg on which to hang some reflections about how the diocese has developed and how it should develop in the future. That future development will only be successful if it reflects 'the facts on the ground' and is based on common assumptions. That is, if it reflects what we actually consider important about our life together.
- Since he has been bishop of this diocese, Bishop Michael has consistently urged us all to 'own' the distinctiveness of our Anglican identity. Synod meetings have considered aspects of this theme over several years, and the bishop's addresses to Synod have set out what he believes our distinctive contribution to the Christian scene in the Middle East might be. That mission will only be effective if we fully understand the implications of what he has been saying.
- Synod 2014 considered an initial Report from Standing Committee setting out some objectives for the coming years. The Report stated that a new constitution and some new structures were desirable to meet the challenges of new situations, unimaginable forty years ago when the diocese was set up. It is important that constitutions and structures have a 'bottom up' rather than a 'top down' ethos, and that can best be achieved by beginning with consultation at local level.
- The 2014 debate saw contributors specifically call for the widest possible consultation.
- At the present time, and on other occasions during its recent life, misunderstandings about church governance and identity have severely hampered the effectiveness of the church and diocese. Standing Committee feels that these misunderstandings need to be ironed out in genuine conversation that leads to common agreement, rather than trying to crisis manage problems as they occur.

Obviously a document such as this has limitations. Many learned volumes could, and have been, written about the things described here. What we have tried to do is respond to the questions we have heard frequently asked in a manner that enables further discussion and elucidation.

What does it mean to say that the church we attend is "an Anglican Church?"

Some people who attend, who have attended Anglican Churches in other countries may well think of the Anglican Church here as a branch of, for example, The Church of England, The Anglican Church of Kenya, or the Episcopal Church in the US. However it is important to say that, though making this connection is perfectly understandable, the Anglican Church here is not the Church of England or the Church of South India or the Church of South Africa or of any other province. It is the Anglican

Church in the Middle East, and as such, part of a family of Churches, often organized by country, which stretches across the world. As a member of the wider Christian family it shares much with other churches but does have distinctive features. These have to do largely with our view of whom we serve; our view on how we minister to those whom we serve, and our view on what our ultimate mission is, and how that can best be coordinated and facilitated.

Whom do we serve?

The Anglican Church is a church that makes itself available to all who want to touch the hem of the Christian garment. It is not a church that is in any way defined by a list of members. All are welcome at our services. We assume the best intentions in those who come to us for any reason. We do not ask, who is my neighbour? But rather try to act as neighbours, without strict entry rules. Our clergy are not gatekeepers.

Worship in a particular and recognisable style is what gives and brings energy and meaning to the rest of our work. We believe that worship combines word and sacrament. Our principle sacramental service is the Eucharist. We urge those who want to be disciples, to be baptized; and having been baptized to be confirmed in their belief. Sacraments are intimately connected with the Word of God. Anglicans believe in the Bible as the inspired word of God, but take note of what Christians in other ages have concluded as they have tried to relate it to their circumstances, and encourage similar reflection in our own times. In other words we encourage reflection and debate about the truth of the Bible, using God-given reason; and we look also to tradition to help us in that process. We assent to the historic creeds and stand in the tradition of orthodoxy, but with an inclusiveness and tolerance which makes that orthodoxy generous and welcoming.

How do we minister?

The Anglican Church recognizes that all God's people: that is, all who respond to his call, have a ministry. But it also recognizes especially the historic three-fold ministry of bishops priests and deacons. Each of these groups: bishops, clergy, laity, have specific roles in worship, service, pastoral care and governance.

What do Bishops do and why do we need them?

For Anglicans the bishop is a symbol of unity in a world of diversity. We welcome local diversity but recognize the need for a wider context and frame of reference than that simply offered by one church congregation in a particular place. In turn, that involves an element of authority. In the early church, individual congregations appealed to Paul to deal with their individual disputes and problems. His answers were an opportunity not just for the exercise of power, but for the introduction of theological creativity and conversation. Today's bishops could be said to have a similar role. They are learned and experienced people who understand and defend the traditions of Christianity and who apply those traditions to individual contexts, with an oversight that only someone outside the immediate situation can. Like Paul they have an intimate relationship with the people whom they serve, and visit them and get to know them better.

There are specific things that only a bishop does. Only a bishop can ordain new priests or deacons. Bishops usually confirm. They represent the church in its widest sense to other Anglicans, to other Christians, to other faiths and of course to wider society. The bishop is the chief minister in a

diocese, chief sacramental minister, chief teacher, chief intercessor and chief pastor. In terms of governance he is the President of Synod. All clergy make an oath of allegiance to him. They are accountable to him for both the content and conduct of their own ministries. One definition of a diocese is that it is a group of Christians gathered around a bishop.

What about clergy? What is their role?

Clergy express the bishop's ministry locally. They are the local overseers of all that the bishop is more widely responsible for. So in the local setting they, in consultation with the laity, are responsible for the mission of the church, for its worship, its priorities, its outreach, its pastoral care and teaching. It follows naturally that they will then be the Chair of local Church Councils, as the bishop is president of Synod.

Can we define a role for the Laity?

The laity are the people of God. All bishops and clergy are also laity, just as all bishops are also deacons and priests. To become a bishop is not a promotion in worldly terms: to leave behind something inferior and move to something more prestigious. It is rather to carry the responsibilities of being a lay person, a deacon and a priest into the new role of oversight.

In that spirit, the role of the whole people of God is sometimes expressed in terms of belonging, believing and behaving. Lay people exercise discipleship and responsible stewardship of all their gifts and resources. They are committed to the concepts of community, fellowship and interconnectedness (conveniently summed up by St Paul using the Greek word *koinonia*). They are called to live out the promises of their baptism, and to faithfully consider at all times what God is calling them to be and do. Through their engagement, Lay people grow ever deeper into the life of faith and sacraments, and cooperate with the clergy in the mission of the parish. They have a duty of care for the clergy, as the clergy have a duty of care for them.

What are the implications of these understandings about ministry, for the way the Church is governed?

In an Anglican diocese, the bishop as an integral part of Synod, is the supreme authority. As bishop he himself is the supreme authority in matters of faith and order. Synod has some specific functions. It acts as a forum for discussion and debate amongst representatives of parishes, prior to decisions being made that affect and are binding upon individual churches and parishes. For example, a typical diocesan Synod in any Anglican Province might have these functions:

- To set a diocesan budget
- To receive accounts
- To approve diocesan policy
- To agree diocesan programmes
- To hold the diocesan strategy
- To affirm guidelines or regulations designed for common usage
- To define parish boundaries and authorizes church building
- To hold the central diocesan organization to account

Synod is the diocese's principal place of meeting interchange and diversity. In the widest possible context it attempts to achieve a measure of consensus, common vision and aspiration.

What then is the role of the local Church Council?

The Council is the local agency of governance within the diocese. It is chaired by the parish priest. Essential members of any Council would be licensed clergy, and the church wardens. The wardens are the bishop's lay representatives in the parish and although elected or appointed locally they are answerable to him or his appointed deputy (usually an archdeacon). The Council is responsible for fixing a budget and overseeing finance throughout the year. It is answerable both to an independent auditor and to an Annual General Meeting. The first call on the budget in a church where the clergy are paid locally would be those payments. The second call on the budget would be payments to the diocesan budget agreed and approved by Synod in each year. Elections should be held annually for membership of the Council, though according to local practice, individual membership may extend for longer periods. Those who represent the local church more widely, for example on diocesan or provincial Synods, should be ex-officio members of their local Councils. It is the Council's responsibility to keep up to date with diocesan and provincial work and activity, and to support the mission of the church in every way possible, in cooperation with the clergy.

Who can take office in a local Church?

It is important that all procedures for local appointments are as transparent as possible. Every Church should have an Electoral Roll. In our unique setting, membership of the role should be open to all members of mainstream churches however that is defined, as well as the Anglican Church per se. Anyone on the Roll is eligible for election or appointment to a lay office. Office holders, such as Wardens should have the bishop's permission to stand for election or accept appointment, if they are not confirmed members of the Anglican Church.

Summary

In summary, the Anglican Church has a distinctive offering to make within the family of Christian Churches, and that should be understood and celebrated. That understanding extends throughout the practice of worship, to the definition of mission and the practice of ministry. Of particular importance is the role of the bishop, and of Synod. These are not to be understood in secular terms such as 'centralisation' or 'another layer of bureaucracy,' but rather as successor to the New Testament witness, and in our modern setting, adding value to the work of the whole people of God in each parish. A recent Synod Meeting shared images, some resonant with the New Testament, that summed up some contemporary understandings of the diocese in current imagination. They included: the body of Christ, the household of faith, the family, guardian and unify-er, a community, a guiding force and a gospel based community, being a provider of a theological framework in which faith and tradition find their unity.