

A Synod Primer

Together on the Way by The Rev. Canon Dr. Scott Sharman

Anglicans tend to like to think we know a few things about synods. And, of course, there's good reasons why we would feel that way. For some of you, this 2024 Synod might be your first experience of participating in this sort of thing in Churchland – lucky you! For others, I would venture to guess there are quite a few members of this upcoming Synod who have taken part in more of them than you can count on both hands. In the Anglican Church of Canada, depending on where you live there will be a Diocesan Synod typically every 2 or 3 years, and sometimes more often. Then there's Provincial Synods, usually every 2 years at the regional level, and General Synods, typically every 3 years as a national expression of our church. While we don't technically refer to them as synods, internationally members of our church also take part regularly in several 'synod-like' structures at the global level, such as the Anglican Consultative Council or the Lambeth Conference. It's no wonder that some have suggested – and I think only slightly tongue-in-cheek – that the purported Anglican distinctive of being a church that is “episcopally led and synodically governed” might more accurately be labeled as “episcopally led and spasmodically governed.”

Yet, while Anglicans represent a branch of the Jesus-movement that most certainly *has synods*, this does not necessarily always equate to being a church that *is synodal* in a more comprehensive and spiritual sense. And in truth, I think it is the latter that is far more important than the former.

It is my hope that this gathering of the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets might be an opportunity to practice having increasingly synod-shaped minds, hearts, and spirits, not only during the synod business sessions this fall, but as you carry from there on as a family of Jesus followers in your time and place. At your synod in November, I will have the privilege of sharing some thoughts with you about what I think it means to live together into a more expansive and enduring understanding of being a synodal communion of Jesus followers. For now, I want to prime the pump just a little bit by naming, in a very limited way, a few of the key descriptors of what I believe a synodal way of being church looks like.

First, a synod-shaped church is *collegial*. This word synod is one we inherit from the Greek language, and it is formed by two smaller Greek words: *syn* meaning “together” and *hodos* meaning “road, or path, or way.” And it's this together part I want to emphasize here. Jesus rarely walks on his own. Have you noticed that? This is shown in many ways in the New Testament witness, perhaps most notably in the fact that among the most significant things Jesus does in the Gospels is call disciples. In some cases we

know their personal names, especially with those disciples often referred to collectively as “the 12”. But there’s also the larger group of disciples called “the 72”, a group Jesus sends out ahead of him to all the surrounding towns – indeed always at least 2 by 2. Later in Acts 6 we meet another cohort, “the 7”, that are commissioned to go together in ministry as well.

I could go on with many more examples of these, but I know you get the point. All of this is there in part to remind us that there really are no solo disciples. To go with Jesus is to be called into a community of disciples that always goes together. Likewise, in the Church, there are not really leaders and followers. We may have different ministries, but we are all leaders. The local parish is not just the priest in ministry and everyone else who passively receives, but each one bringing an essential piece of the puzzle to the table. The diocese is not the bishop overseeing the church on their own but every order of ministry playing their parts of the symphony together. We all know this, of course, but at certain times in the history of the Church our awareness of this basic truth has faded back. The resulting clericalism and hierarchicalism has never been good for us, but I think now more than ever that distorted model is no longer sustainable. To be the Church in the decades before us is going to again call for an ‘all-hands-on-deck’ approach. This is why we need to recover that root idea of carrying out the ministry and witness of the Church in synod; by walking together and sharing leadership and authority ever more deeply and collegially.

Second, synodal expressions of church are *dialogical*. It is interesting to me to note just how much of the message of Jesus which we receive from the witness of the Gospel narratives is expressed through conversation and interaction with others. Sure, Jesus gives a few extended sermons here and there, and stands and delivers teaching on occasion. But even then, these encounters tend to be full of interjections from onlookers or questions posed back to the crowd. Jesus often meets with people while traveling, or in their homes, or around the dinner table, and engages with them in a genuine back-and-forth. From this I think we can take so much more than the inference that the Incarnate Word of God was friendly and chatty. Rather, this seems to be a presenting model or a posture for how God invites God’s people to be as well.

The word dialogue, of course, means two words. Sometimes – and frankly far too often in our history – people who are seeking to follow Jesus have acted as if they are meant to pursue a monologue, which is one word. We have acted as if only we have things to teach, and everyone else just needs to listen and learn. This is not adequate to the Christian vocation, and whenever it occurs it always leads to abuses and harms. In fact, we could probably stand to spend a good bit of time stepping back and simply listening, allowing others to have a chance to speak for a while. As Gospel people we do have a word to say, and it is a good one! But no longer can we treat this like a one-way street. A church in synod is a church that can also be evangelized by the good news others have for us, and which strives to always speak and act in dialogue.

Third, a church that not only has synods but lives in an ongoing mode of synodality is *provisional*. As noted about, the word synod literally means together on the road, or the path, or the way. It contains within it an image of being on a journey, not something static but on the move. Being a church that is

“on the way” implies that, at least in some sense, we have not fully arrived at our destination; we have not fully completed all that we are meant to do or to be about. There is an incompleteness and a work in progress character built into being a follower of Jesus, precisely because what the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus means is always growing and expanding as new people and places and questions and situations come on the scene in human history.

This too is a critical idea to keep in mind because it can restrain us as church folks from the pride of believing that we have got God all figured out and that we can just sit back and wait for others to finally catch up. It can also allow us the flexibility to see that the things we tend to think of set in stone about the or the stuff we typically assume are the most important may in fact need to be held onto a little more lightly in a new time and place. This is not to say we just throw longstanding and treasured doctrines and traditions out the window haphazardly, of course. But neither do we need to feel we must cling to certain forms of expression or ways of enacting those things strictly and slavishly. We are pilgrim people on the way, and therefore we can expect a few unexpected twists and turns in the road.

These three principles – being collegial, dialogical, and provisional – are some of the building blocks of a faithful and fruitful synod gathering, and I encourage you to meditate on them in the weeks ahead. I have no doubt that making them the watchwords for your time together in November would already be of benefit on its own as you evaluate budgets and programs, debate motions, amend amendments, and pass resolutions. But as you do, perhaps think about this not so much as a church business meeting that you will be engaged in just for a couple of days, but rather merely as the practice round for being and becoming a more synodal people of God in every encounter and every day.

Grace and Peace to all the saints.

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