

ARTICLE

Synodality at the universal level in the Anglican Communion

Russell Dewhurst 

Doctoral Student and Fellow, Centre for Law and Religion, Cardiff University

Email: DewhurstRJ1@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

This article proposes that while the four instruments of communion of the Anglican Communion (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates' Meeting, the Lambeth Conference, and the Anglican Consultative Council) are not synods, they nevertheless manifest synodality. The historical origins of member church autonomy are first explored; then, each of the instruments is briefly discussed in turn; finally some suggestions are made for further exploration in the mode of receptive ecumenism.

Keywords: Anglican Communion; Anglicanism; synodality

Introduction

The Holy Spirit tells St Peter of the men looking for him in Joppa that he should 'accompany them without hesitation, because I have sent them'.¹ In this 'accompanying' we might hear an echo of the roots of the Greek word *σύνοδος*, literally 'journeying together' – and Acts 10 is the beginning of the journey in which the Church discerns God's will for the inclusion of the Gentiles, a journey that reaches its narrative conclusion five chapters later at the Council of Jerusalem – itself a synod, and indeed the prototype of synods.

In the Anglican Communion, the four instruments of communion – the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates' Meeting, the Lambeth Conference, and the Anglican Consultative Council – have a 'universal'² role but are not termed synods. The reluctance to name them 'synods', despite their obvious similarity to synods, lies in the Anglican association of 'synodical' with 'governance' – and the four instruments do not exercise powers of governance over the churches of the

¹ Acts 10:20, NRSV.

² Anglicans would more usually speak of the 'Communion' level than the 'universal', because Anglicans see themselves as only one part of God's church. 'Universal' is used here to reflect the terminology of the Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to be the Church – Local, Regional, Universal* (2017).

Anglican Communion.³ Nevertheless, I will argue in this paper that the instruments do manifest *synodality*, that is, a journeying together in the Spirit. I begin with an historical excursus, explaining why there is no universal jurisdiction in the Anglican Communion. I then describe the four instruments in terms of synodality. I conclude with some examples of how the instruments of communion have enabled synodality at the universal level, and suggest where Anglicans might fruitfully learn from others in the spirit of receptive ecumenism.

Historical background

In the sixteenth century, the Church of England rejected the universal jurisdiction of the Holy See. Article 37 of the 39 Articles of Religion states:

The King's Majesty hath the chief power in this Realm of *England*, and other his Dominions, unto whom the chief Government of all Estates of this Realm, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Civil, in all causes doth appertain, and is not, nor ought to be, subject to any foreign Jurisdiction.

The same Article understands the Royal Supremacy to be a scriptural doctrine:

We give ... to our Princes ... that only prerogative, which we see to have been given always to all godly Princes in holy Scriptures by God himself; that is, that they should rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evil-doers.

However, the churches of the Anglican Communion do not all share the doctrine of the royal supremacy. Instead, the churches of the Communion have united around a premise which is most clearly stated in Principle 12.1 of the *Principles of Canon Law Common to the Churches of the Anglican Communion*.⁴

Each church is autonomous in respect of its freedom of self-government.

It can be seen at once that this principle is radically different from the doctrine of the royal supremacy.

Historically, the principle of provincial autonomy developed in Anglican churches in British colonies and former colonies as it was recognised that, there, the church

³ Anglican Communion Office, *Principles of Canon Law Common to the Churches of the Anglican Communion* (2022). Principle 15.6 states 'Each church, province and diocese has an assembly, namely a synod, council or other body, the function of which is to govern'. Hence, as the function of the instruments of communion is not to govern, they are not termed synods. The word 'Council' is present in the title of the Anglican Consultative Council, but modified by the adjective 'Consultative'.

⁴ Anglican Communion Office (note 3). There is no universal system of canon law common to the churches of the Anglican Communion; however, the canons and constitutions of the member churches do manifest certain common principles, which have been established by scholarly enquiry. Hereafter, reference to a 'principle' is to the 2022 edition.

was *not* by law established.⁵ In 1801, PECUSA (the Anglican church in the USA now known as TEC), reflecting the fact that they now lived in a republic, revised Article 37 to state:

The Power of the Civil Magistrate extendeth to all men, as well Clergy as Laity, in all things temporal; but hath no authority in things purely spiritual. And we hold it to be the duty of all men who are professors of the Gospel, to pay respectful obedience to the Civil Authority, regularly and legitimately constituted.⁶

Thus revised, the Article asserts that the civil magistrate does not have *spiritual* authority. Where, then, was spiritual authority to be found? The same question was asked in the colonial Anglican churches that were not spiritually governed by the Crown. When it was desired, for example, to create a new diocese, how could this be achieved? William Broughton (first Bishop of Australia) found an inherent spiritual power in the Provincial Synod ('the Provincial Synod possesses [an] inherent power of sub-dividing dioceses'⁷) and George Augustus Selwyn (first Bishop of New Zealand), great reviver of synods, appealed to patristic precedent.⁸

In 1930, the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops approved the association of dioceses and provinces into 'national' churches, although the word 'national' fell out of favour in the post-war period.⁹ As nations gained independence, it seemed appropriate that ecclesiastical structures should no longer reflect a colonial legacy. For this reason, the principle of autonomy became attached to the national church, just as sovereignty was to a nation. By the late twentieth century, therefore, it was no longer the (metropolitan) province that exercised an inherent power justified from patristic sources – now it was each member church of the Anglican Communion (often co-terminous with a nation) that was understood to be autonomous, even the Church of England.¹⁰

The principle of member church autonomy is now taken almost as axiomatic.¹¹ From it are derived further principles that are common Anglican understandings

⁵ 'The United Church of England and Ireland is no part of the Constitution in any colonial settlement...'. *In re Lord Bishop of Natal* [1864] EngR 864; (1864) 3 Moo PCC NS 115, 148, 152; [1864] EngR 864; 16 ER 43, 57.

⁶ W Perry (ed), *Journals of General Conventions of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in the United States, 1785–1835* (Claremont, 1874), 280.

⁷ Quoted in A Ross, *A Still More Excellent Way* (London, 2020), 60.

⁸ R Wilson, *George Augustus Selwyn (1809–1878): Theological Formation, Life and Work* (London, 2014), 111–136. Although Selwyn appealed to patristic authority, the revived synods often copied contemporary parliamentary practice.

⁹ Often the member church's territory is co-terminous with national boundaries, but some churches' territories cover only part of a sovereign nation (such as the Scottish Episcopal Church) and many cover several nations (such as the Anglican Church of Southern Africa).

¹⁰ The principle of member church autonomy is not incompatible with the royal supremacy. The Church of England exercises its autonomy through its Supreme Governor (who is a member of the Church of England). See the *Report of the Archbishops' Committee on Church and State* (London, 1916) 26–27, 39–57.

¹¹ The very first thing which a visitor to the Anglican Communion website reads is, 'The Anglican Communion is a family of 42 autonomous and independent-yet-interdependent national, pan-national and regional churches in communion with the see of Canterbury', <https://www.anglicancommunion.org>, accessed 30 September 2024.

of fundamental authority and thus, in a sense, successors to Article 37, such as:

11.2 Each church recognises that the churches of the Anglican Communion are bound together, not juridically by a central legislative, executive or judicial authority, but by mutual loyalty maintained through the instruments of Anglican unity as an expression of that communion.

12.5 No church is legally bound by a decision of any ecclesiastical body external to itself, unless that decision is authorised under or incorporated into its own law.

The instruments of communion

It is a common principle that:

11.5 The instruments of communion enjoy such binding authority within a church as may be prescribed by the law of that church.

In other words, the instruments possess no inherent universal jurisdiction and there is no pan-Anglican General Synod. We might therefore be tempted to conclude there is no synodality (an obviously cognate term) at the universal level. However, synodality is not confined to synods with jurisdiction or legislative and disciplinary powers. The second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission described synodality in the following way:

In each local church all the faithful are called to walk together in Christ. The term *synodality* (derived from *σύννοδος* meaning ‘common way’) indicates the manner in which believers and churches are held together in communion as they do this. It expresses their vocation as people of the Way (cf Acts 9.2) to live, work and journey together in Christ who is the Way...¹²

and was explicit that the instruments of communion were in fact ‘instruments of synodality’:

In the Anglican Communion as a whole the Primates’ Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference and the Archbishop of Canterbury serve as instruments of synodality.¹³

I now briefly describe each of the four instruments, and suggest how each exhibits the synodal style.

¹² Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III* (London, 1998) 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

The Archbishop of Canterbury

The Anglican Communion is a family of churches in Communion with the See of Canterbury.¹⁴ We could therefore describe the Archbishop as the ecclesiastical keystone of the Communion. From each member church's bilateral relationship of communion with the See of Canterbury arises the multi-lateral relationship which we call the Anglican Communion. Some of the many effects of this are described in Principle 14, which begins:

14.1 Each church in the Anglican Communion welcomes members of all other churches in the Communion to share in the spiritual benefits available in the host church.

The office of the Archbishop of Canterbury therefore enables members of Anglican churches to see one another as members of the same Communion. Through our common relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury, we walk together as Anglicans. This may seem a somewhat nebulous concept, but it is made concrete for the traveller welcomed to receive Holy Communion in an Anglican church far from home, or in the small and struggling parish in a place where Christians may be few or enduring persecution, yet are conscious of belonging to a wider, global Anglican family.

Aside from a very few exceptions in some churches,¹⁵ the Archbishop of Canterbury exercises only moral or persuasive (and not jurisdictional) authority at the universal level.

The Lambeth Conference

The Lambeth Conference takes place approximately every 10 years, and all serving bishops of the Anglican Communion are usually invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who convenes it. Participation in the Lambeth Conference has always been predicated on the understanding that it has no juridical authority.¹⁶ When Archbishop Longley convened the first Lambeth Conference in 1867, he stated that the conference was not a general synod for the Anglican Communion and that 'no decision [shall be] come to that shall affect generally the interests of the Church, but that we shall meet for brotherly counsel and encouragement'.¹⁷ The term synod was seen to imply jurisdiction (in the way that, for example, the Church of England's General Synod can legislate for its dioceses) and was therefore rejected.¹⁸

¹⁴ 'The churches of the Anglican Communion remain in communion with the See of Canterbury.' Anglican Communion Office (note 3), Part II, Preface.

¹⁵ N Doe, *Canon Law in the Anglican Communion* (Oxford, 1998), 344.

¹⁶ O Chadwick, 'Introduction' in R Coleman, *Resolutions of the Twelve Lambeth Conferences 1867–1988* (Toronto, 1992), viii.

¹⁷ Quoted in Doe (note 15), 346.

¹⁸ Recent research indicates that part of the reason why, from the beginning, the Lambeth Conference was not seen to have the power to make binding resolutions was because of the royal supremacy. See B Guyer, "'This Unprecedented Step': The Royal Supremacy and the 1867 Lambeth Conference' in P Avis and B Guyer, *The Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity and Purpose* (London, 2017), 73–76.

The Lambeth Conference itself has stated that Member Churches:

are bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common counsel of the bishops in conference.¹⁹

Despite not being understood as a synod, the Conference manifests synodality through the synodal method of common counsel.

Sometimes the Lambeth Conference has made non-juridical resolutions,²⁰ which are considered by the member churches, and if each so desires, may be acted upon. For example, a 1930 resolution of the Lambeth Conference respecting the churches of the Union of Utrecht led the way to an Act of Convocation in the Church of England in 1932 establishing inter-communion between those churches.²¹

The 2022 Lambeth Conference issued ‘calls’ instead of resolutions, which were seen as more appropriate than formal resolutions.²² The three phases of that Conference were described as ‘Listening Together’ (bishops’ pre-Conference meetings online), ‘Walking Together’ (the meeting in Canterbury), and ‘Witnessing Together’ (implementing the calls). It is clear that themes of synodality are present in this structure.

The Primates’ Meeting

The first Primates’ Meeting was convened by Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan in 1978, and was intended for ‘leisurely thought, prayer and deep consultation’.²³ The purpose of the meetings is to ‘give leadership and support’, ‘provide guidance’ and also ‘address pressing issues affecting the life of the Communion’.²⁴ The meetings take place every 1–2 years, and are they thus placed to be able to respond to ‘pressing issues’ more swiftly than is the Lambeth Conference.

Alexander Ross has argued that in the post-war period the rising importance of national churches’ autonomy was reinforced by developments in which

¹⁹ Lambeth Conference 1930, res 49.

²⁰ ‘The Lambeth Conference can be seen as a conciliar event in a non-juridical mode. Here the bishops come precisely to confer and not to take decisions that are binding on the member Churches.’ The Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith & Order, ‘Towards a Symphony of Instruments’, s 2.2.1, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/209979/Towards-a-Symphony-of-Instruments-Web-Version.pdf>, accessed 30 September 2024.

²¹ R Dewhurst ‘The “New World” of Ecclesiastical Law’, in N Doe and S Coleman, *The Legal History of the Church of England* (Oxford, 2024), 188.

²² The calls addressed the following themes: Discipleship; Environment and Sustainable Development; Anglican Identity; Safe Church; Science and Faith; Human Dignity; Christian Unity; Mission and Evangelism; Inter Faith; and Reconciliation. ‘The aim of each call is to deepen faithfulness to God, advance the ministry of the communion and enable wider participation in the calls by churches and communities around the world’, <https://www.lambethconference.org/phase-3/the-lambeth-calls/>, accessed 30 September 2024.

²³ Quoted in A Ross, *A Still More Excellent Way: Authority and Polity in the Anglican Communion* (London, 2020), 123.

²⁴ Primates’ Meeting, ‘Purpose and Scope of the Primates’ Meeting: A Working Document’, https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/68360/prim_scpurpose.pdf, accessed 30 September 2024.

the Primates' Meeting exercised increasing Communion-wide (albeit moral and non-coercive) authority.²⁵ In the early church, the designation of a see as primatial had been mainly an honorary title. From the twentieth century, however, Anglican primates were increasingly seen as personifying the sovereignty of the national church.²⁶ When the primates gather, therefore, this can be seen as symbolising and embodying the journeying-together of the Anglican churches.

The 1998 Lambeth Conference resolved that the Primates' Meeting should include among its responsibilities 'intervention in cases of exceptional emergency which are incapable of internal resolution within provinces'.²⁷ This resolution is in tension with the autonomy of the member churches, and it remains the case that the Primates' Meeting is not able to intervene in the internal affairs of a member church unless invited to do so by that church.

The Anglican Consultative Council (ACC)

The ACC was created following a 1968 resolution of the Lambeth Conference. Like the other instruments, it is not a synod for the Anglican Communion, but unlike them it incorporates the involvement of the laity and clergy alongside bishops:

The Anglican Consultative Council was to give a voice to lay people who were now fully participating in the governance of their provinces across the world; although the Council, like the Lambeth Conference, has always disavowed any intention to develop a more formal synodical status.²⁸

The ACC is a limited company registered in the UK, and its Articles of Association of the ACC provide that:

The Council's objects ('the Objects') are specifically restricted to the following: to advance the Christian religion and in particular to promote the unity and purposes of the Churches of the Anglican Communion in mission, evangelism, ecumenical relations, communication, administration and finance.²⁹

The ACC's membership is primarily composed of representatives nominated by each member church, along with others (such as the Archbishop of Canterbury who is President *ex officio*). We do find something close to a jurisdiction (at least as regards membership), in that the ACC Standing Committee (with the Primates

²⁵ Ross (note 23).

²⁶ If primatial sees were once almost entirely honorific, they now usually have specific functions in the canon law of Anglican churches, including general leadership; initiating, developing, and implementing policy and strategy; representing a church in its dealings with other churches, national, and international bodies. See Principle 40.

²⁷ Resolution III.6(b).

²⁸ Anglican Communion Office, *Windsor Report 2004: Lambeth Commission on Communion* (2005), para 103.

²⁹ 'Articles of Association of The Anglican Consultative Council', s 4, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/39479/the-constitution-of-the-anglican-consultative-council.pdf>, accessed 30 September 2024.

exercising a veto) can remove member churches from the Council.³⁰ The ACC meets approximately every three years, although many committees and networks³¹ function between meetings. The meetings are an opportunity to address shared problems and discern God's will together. The powers of the ACC³² enable it to facilitate, advise, encourage, and 'develop as far as possible agreed Anglican policies in the world mission of the Church'.³³ The work of the ACC very explicitly focuses on enabling participation in the mission of the church through the path of walking together. The ACC therefore, not least in its involvement of the laity, is an essential component of Anglican synodality at the universal level.

Synodality in practice

Having examined each of the instruments in turn, I conclude with some examples that may illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of the Anglican approach to synodality at the universal level.

Synodical government was revived in New Zealand and Australia in the nineteenth century, and it was chiefly through bishops' common counsel (effected by the Lambeth Conference in particular) that these models were shared among Anglican churches. The inclusion of the laity in synodical government similarly spread in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. No central dictat imposed synodical government, or lay involvement, but there was a general discernment, taken up by the bishops of each church in turn, that this was the direction in which God was calling them. Today, both of these aspects of Anglican polity are universal, and are principles of Anglican canon law (qv principles 15.6 and 15.9).

The formation of *The Principles of Canon Law Common to the Churches of the Anglican Communion* can itself be seen as the fruits of the synodal style. The principles were discerned in dialogue between canonists from across the churches, and their authority derives from a common discernment among Anglican churches that they represent the commonalities in our canon law. They show with a greater clarity how Anglicans – despite the diversity of cultures – are already journeying together on common paths.

Yet there are also clear deficiencies in the Anglican model. Sometimes, common counsel has not led to agreement or development along similar lines. At the present time we see churches of the Communion diverging on matters of human sexuality and the doctrine of marriage. Whereas most Anglicans have been happy to live with difference in other areas of doctrine (such as the differences we have seen between Article 37 in England and in the USA), on the question of human sexuality, some

³⁰ '7.2 The Member-Churches of the Council shall be those bodies listed in the Schedule to these Articles ... with the assent of two-thirds of the Primates of the Anglican Communion (which shall be deemed to have been received if not withheld in writing within four months from the date of notification) the Standing Committee may alter or add to the Schedule', *ibid*.

³¹ Such as the Anglican Health and Community Network, the Anglican Communion Environmental Network, or the Anglican Communion Legal Advisers Network, of which I am the chair.

³² *Ibid*, 5.

³³ *Ibid*, 5.4.

Anglicans have felt the differences have become too great for ‘walking together’ to continue. Principle 12.7 states:

Each autonomous church has the greatest possible liberty to order its life and affairs, taking into consideration appropriateness to its people in their geographical, cultural and historical context, *and compatibility with its belonging to and interdependence with the church universal.*³⁴

Thus, member church autonomy ought to be exercised in a way that acknowledges what is owed to the church universal³⁵ – however, there is no procedural method by which this can be guaranteed by any body at the universal level. The instruments of communion do not have the power to conclude these debates or issue a definitive ruling. Whereas St Peter’s journey begun in Acts 10 may be seen to reach its destination in the conclusive decision of the Synod of Jerusalem in Acts 15, the Anglican Communion has no means of reaching a conclusive synodical decision on the divisive questions of the day.

Contemplating these issues in 1998, the second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission proposed that the solution for Anglicans could be found in the universal primacy as a gift to be shared. They wrote that:

such a primacy could be offered and received even before our churches are in full communion. Both Roman Catholics and Anglicans look to this ministry being exercised in collegiality and synodality ... This sort of primacy will already assist the Church on earth to be the authentic catholic *koinonia* in which unity does not curtail diversity, and diversity does not endanger but enhances unity.³⁶

while acknowledging that this development was predicated on the assumption:

that Anglicans be open to and desire a recovery and re-reception under certain clear conditions of the exercise of universal primacy by the Bishop of Rome.³⁷

Although many welcomed this finding, the reception to *The Gift of Authority* in 1998 was not universally positive among Anglicans.³⁸ Yet the difficulties in the Anglican Communion have only increased in the quarter-century since its publication. The

³⁴ Emphasis added.

³⁵ This principle, advising churches not to rely on their legal autonomy to the detriment of the wider Communion, might be seen as a canonical instantiation, for Anglicans, of St Thomas’s teaching on *epikeia* {equity}: ‘bonum autem est, praetermissis verbis legis, sequi id quod poscit iustitiae ratio et communis utilitas’ {but it is good, the words of the law being set aside, to follow that which justice and the common good demand} *ST II:II q. 120 a. 1*; or of the Scriptural injunction ‘only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another’, Galatians 5:13, NRSV.

³⁶ ARCIC (note 12), 60.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁸ Would a re-reception of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome require a reformulation of the Church of England’s doctrine of the royal supremacy? Such a question lies beyond the scope of this paper, but I note that six dioceses which were, until that time, part of the Church of England radically changed their

third Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission has returned to these themes and finds that:

Our common reading of the New Testament and post-apostolic period leads Catholics and Anglicans to agree that *episcopate*, synodality, and primacy are enduring and necessary, and are gifts of God for the unity and mission of the Church.³⁹

The Commission asks⁴⁰ that these matters continue to be discussed among our churches in the mode of receptive ecclesial learning and in the style of synodality – to which work this paper is prayerfully offered as a small contribution.

Acknowledgements. This article is based on a paper delivered to the Twenty-Third Colloquium of Anglican and Roman Catholic Canon Lawyers, ‘Canon Law and Synodality’, meeting at the Pontifical University of St Thomas of Aquinas, The Angelicum, Rome, 24–27 September 2024. A version of this article was originally published in edition 206 of the *Newsletter of the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland* and is published here with the permission of the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

relationship with the crown at the disestablishment of the Church in Wales in 1920, showing that doctrinal development here is possible.

³⁹ Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Walking together on the Way* (London, 2018), 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 145.

Cite this article: R Dewhurst, ‘Synodality at the universal level in the Anglican Communion’ (2025) 27 *Ecc LJ* 170–179. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956618X25000018>