

What is a Synod and Why Do We Hold Them?



Our Anglican Church is structured in ever-widening circles of daily functioning together as Church. We are “episcopally led and synodically governed” in every circle and overall. No matter what the level or the number of people at each level, we operate the same way: we gather together to make decisions guiding our path forward as the Church who lives in God’s kingdom, reveals God’s kingdom, and points to the coming fullness of God’s kingdom.

Not everyone gathers to make these decisions. From the designated “church board” (there are various names for this board) at the parish level to the very outside circle of the worldwide Anglican Communion, it is a representative number of people who gather on behalf of the other members of the Church. This is the “synodically governed” part of things.

The word “synod” comes from the Greek word σύνοδος [ˈsinoðos] and is the Latin equivalent of *concilium* which means “council”. From the beginnings of the Church, we have had synods – or councils – who gather to guide us according to God’s purpose (see Acts 15).

So what about the “episcopally led” part of the phrase? The word “episcopal” comes from the Latin word *episcopus* which means “overseer” – the bishop, in other words. The diocesan bishop is the chief pastor of all within her diocese – clergy and non-clergy persons. Bishops have a special responsibility for apostolic teaching and doctrinal orthodoxy (right worship) with the right of conducting, ordering, and authorising all worship services in her diocese. Bishops also are ministers of unity (as we all are, according to Paul in 2 Cor.5:18-19). Bishops lead us in establishing and promoting peace and unity, striving for the visible unity of the whole Church in the world. Due to the breadth of the bishop’s responsibilities, she has the ultimate authority, with input from the “council” around her, of course, on matters having to do with the Church in her diocese.

Well then, what about the parish council where we don’t (usually) have the bishop among us? The incumbents of each parish act in the bishop’s stead as her representative in the parish. Since the bishop cannot be in all places at all times, the bishop charges others to carry out her responsibilities in her physical absence. This is why incumbents are appointed by, and swear an oath to the bishop.

We will soon be gathering as the Synod of the Diocese of Algoma. We will be a representative gathering of all of the people across the diocese, assembling both to learn and to discuss pertinent issues, doing the “business of the Church”. Archbishop Anne, our overseer, will lead the proceedings and take counsel from those present.