

Reflections from an Anglican perspective

Each one with the gift of discernment

Callan Slipper

The author is an Anglican priest and theologian. Since 2017, he has served as the National Ecumenical Officer for the Church of England. He is on the editorial board of 'Claritas', journal for dialogue and culture, and is a member of the Focolare Movement's interdisciplinary study center, the Abba School.

It is at once surprising and welcome for Anglican ears to hear Pope Francis's call for a synodal church. It rather shakes the presupposition that the Roman Catholic communion of Churches is all about hierarchy and primatial authority. At the same time, such talk sounds so familiar. Clearly a new spirit is abroad, one with an eye towards mission and what makes a church fit to speak the gospel to society today.

The conversion required by a "spiritual synodal style", as Brendan Leahy speaks of the Holy Spirit urging through the Pope, is profound. It is one that Anglicans, despite their experience of being a "synodical church", have to learn as well. This constant humility and openness to dialogue coupled with recognition of the various gifts, graces, and charisms present in the other members of the Body of Christ, is a real challenge. A bishop may have a gift of discernment, and it should be recognized, but in their own particular ways, others will have this gift, too.

This concentration on synodality is timely, given the Third Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III) document published in 2018, entitled, *Walking Together on the Way*. Its title, referring to the literal translation of the Greek term, "synod" (together, "syn" and way, "hodos"), suggests that synodality is at the heart of the document. Indeed, at its very core, the conversion needed for synodality within the church shapes the methodology of ecumenical relations between the churches. It is a conversion that makes each church ready to learn from the other and thus able to walk together in coming closer to Christ. Christ is the destination and the One who makes us one. The process begins, however, in deep humility. Section 17 of the document above states, "ARCIC III believes that the time is ripe to pursue the task of ecumenical engagement as one that includes explicit ecclesial self-critique. It is not enough to recognize that there is something of gift and grace in the other. We must explore what God has given to our partners which, as Pope Francis has said, 'is also meant to be a gift for us' (EG §246). This is particularly so when such 'treasure[s] to be shared' address difficulties in one's own tradition."

Synodality is touched upon in a number of the indications offered by the ARCIC regarding

ways in which the two churches can learn from one another. Anglican inclusion of laity in decision-making and the possibility for open debates -- both part of its synodical governance -- are mentioned. Similarly, Roman Catholic structures that serve to enhance unity are also highlighted. It must be said, however, that both churches are in need of further growth in culture and practices in order to allow for an ever deeper synodality.

Currently, the Church of England is undergoing a process of promoting needed, cultural change. Significantly, the main driver of this - like the Pope's call for a synodal church - is mission. The Anglican process is called: Setting God's people free. It seeks to achieve two key shifts, that of 'encouraging and equipping lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life; and affirming and enacting the complementary gifting, vocation and mutual accountability in discipleship between lay and ordained followers'.¹ This missional culture is precisely what is needed to fully empower lay people in their participation in the Church's synodical structures. It requires a recognition that the Church is not primarily about the clergy, but rather it is about all God's people, with laity on the front line in serving the world, to bring about its transformation.

This empowerment of laity acknowledges the Holy Spirit's gifts given to the whole people of God. In fact, newly canonized John Henry Newman (who lived the first half of his life as an Anglican) spoke of this in his, 'Essay on consulting the faithful on questions of doctrine', as being instrumental in saving the Church from heresy. This *sensus fidelium* is a treasure to be guarded and employed in Church decision-making. It is also a theological basis for the core Anglican method of governance: bishop in synod. This requires three elements: episcopal (because bishops have their personal charism to discern truth and govern the church), clergy (co-workers with the bishop in care for the church), and laity (who share in the *sensus fidelium* and bring a wide range of church and world experience unavailable to most bishops and clergy).

¹ GS 2145, 1 – A document presented to the Church of England's General Synod, July 2019.