GETTING THE MESSAGE
REPORTS AND REPORTING

A resource pack for two-way communication between Synods and Chaplaincies

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REPORTING AND REPORTS

Who gives a report?

In order to spread the load, many dioceses have some kind of reporting system: some have only one report; some have separate clergy and laity reports; some have regular reporters; some take it in turns for members to be the reporter; some divide out the reporting amongst their members each time. There seem to be some dioceses, however, which have no defined system. **We think it is particularly helpful for new members that each diocese should have some general diocesan guidelines and principles, without being unduly prescriptive.** However, there is nothing whatsoever to prevent members giving their own reports as well if they wish and distributing them how and where they will.

Where and when is the reporting done?

When a diocese has a policy to have **one** report (clergy and/or laity) it is often on the assumption that this is a report to the Diocesan Synod and/or in the diocesan magazine, and in some dioceses reporting may go no further than this. Other dioceses have a system whereby areas are divided out amongst the GS members, who are then expected to report to their various Deanery Synods; some encourage GS members to report to parishes within their areas as well. Sometimes the whole question of reporting is left vague.

We do not recommend that there is only one report, for reasons which should be clear from this booklet, and we especially **recommend that reporting is not confined to diocesan or even to deanery Synods.** If a report is confined to these, it can easily happen that there is a big gap between the event and the report. For some matters that arise in the Synod, a time lapse may not be very important, but otherwise we think there is little point in giving a report which is dated. If one is giving a general talk about an aspect or aspects of the GS, it is another matter, but **reports should be as immediate as is humanly possible, especially when there has been media debate on an item.**

Reporting areas

If practicable, the system of assigning Reporting Areas to individual GS members is to be recommended – there is nothing like giving a human face to an institution. This need not be limited to deanery synods, however, as the more members of congregations that can be reached the better.

In a diocese that has a large geographical area and a scattering of churches and where the number of GS members is consequently small (such as Hereford or, even more obviously, Europe), getting around to all may be an impossibility. Email is the best way to deal with this problem, but personal appearances are also important for engaging interest and a diocese will hopefully devise some kind of rotation system before and/or after each Synod, so that each benefice has a chance at least once or twice in a quinquennium to hear a report and meet with one of its GS members.

To whom does a report go?

The ideal would be that every member of a congregation should have access to a report if they wish. Since this is unrealistic, the aim must be at least to reach as many members of our congregations as possible. Written reports, however, even if circulated more widely than to synods, often end up in a large pile of papers on some busy person's desk and perhaps never reach the congregations. "Newsletter Inserts"(*see p. 14*) which give **references for further**

information would help to deal with this problem, as would Information Chains *(see p. 35)*. **At least all Diocesan Websites should carry one or more such reports *(see also p. 34)*.**

We also recommend more extended use of oral reports where possible (see p 31).

General considerations for all reporting

Length

Although this naturally depends on what the time-slot is or what the rough word count should be, in general the report should be **as short as possible, providing it can still be interesting**. We have often heard, however, of members being allocated five minutes for a report at a diocesan or deanery synod or being asked to cover the whole of a session in 250 words for a diocesan magazine. To do either of these adequately is hardly possible, nor does it indicate that the diocese or deanery sets great store by what happens at the General Synod. GS members should insist on enough time or space to do their job properly. **We recommend that it should be taken for granted by all diocesan and deanery synods that an adequate slot is reserved for GS oral reports and questions or for questions on a written report.**

How much does the recipient know already?

It is obvious that the members of a diocesan synod are likely to know much more than others. In a parish, many people are likely to know only what they have read in the papers. Reports should be adjusted accordingly, but naturally without any sense of "dumbing down" for the less well-informed. There is a particular plea from some of our consultants that reports should be accessible to all and not just for "the well-educated middle classes". We think this is an argument for different kinds of reports and reporters, since the idea of one-report-for-all, going to senior clergy as well as congregations of all types, is likely to be directed either more at one than the other or to fall between two stools.

Language and terminology

Reporters should be careful about using ecclesiastical terminology and acronyms. Words which have become familiar to GS members may be completely unfamiliar to some of the recipients and, if used, may leave them feeling excluded or ignorant. "Suffragan", for instance, is not widely understood, and we have also been asked by some congregation members what "laity" means. Unless one is completely sure that the reader or audience fully understands a term, one should always give an explanation when first using it.

This is particularly true of *acronyms*. Even on a diocesan synod, a new member may not previously have heard the acronym DBF, for instance, and many are hesitant to ask, feeling they ought to know. We recommend that the first time a term is used the full expression is given followed by its acronym. In a written report, it is useful to include a section at the end where all the acronyms used are listed plus what they stand for.

Contents

What most interests the audience?

The subject depends on the recipients - it could be Mission, the Liturgy, a financial decision, etc. – but there is one general truth: people are always interested in what they can plainly see touches their own lives, work and parish. It is also obviously true that many people are permanently interested in anything to do with sex, gender, scandal and violence. The media know these truths well and if you want to know what will interest your audience most before, during and after a synod, check the media reports.

Selecting the items

It is wisest not to give a blow-by-blow report of all that happened in a synod and also not necessarily to follow the order in which items appeared on the agenda. Instead, it is best to group them (e.g. legislation, liturgy, church affairs, moral issues, etc.). Since some topics will be left out, the particular items chosen will depend on the specific group addressed and the points it is important to get across. For some recipients, just one or two outstanding items may be all that is needed.

Using the media

Take advantage of the fact that the media's coverage of Synod often alerts people to what is going on and issues that will be raised in a Synod. The more sensational and therefore more newsworthy items tend to overshadow Synod's wide-ranging work, nevertheless what appears in the media can be used to make people interested in listening to "what really happened". A report advertised locally as dealing with MARRIAGE AFTER DIVORCE is likely to attract more listeners than one that simply advertises a GENERAL SYNOD REPORT, for instance. Other subjects can be taken after dealing with the "main attraction".

Correcting misleading media information

Correct information should be circulated as widely and immediately as possible. Email is obviously the fastest way and an Information Chain *(see p.35)* would be invaluable here. It is useful when doing so to quote the misleading information which has caught the headlines. Some we have experienced, such as **Synod Bans the Banns** and **Synod goes for Time of Trial,** can be easily disproved by brief references to the actual decisions; others may need more explanation.

What type of report?

Customs have usually grown up in dioceses so that reports are presented in a certain way and at a certain time. We would encourage dioceses to take a new look at the way reporting is done and possibly to rethink their strategies – though this is not to assume that the old way may not prove the best in the end.
The two main types of reporting are:

- Written reports
- Oral reports

Which type is most appropriate will depend on for whom or what the report is intended and the personal preference and skills of the reporter.

WRITTEN REPORTS

Written reports for publication or general circulation

At the time of writing GS reporters use various forms, for example:

- Formal essays
- Short notes on various topics
- Synod diaries
- Chatty letters
- Headings under which are listed decisions and voting figures

Reporters will obviously choose the form best suited to them and the most appropriate for the circumstances.

We do not recommend that a written report is read aloud unless it is specifically for the media (and not always even then). A written report is there to be read by readers. Its language is usually denser and more formal than in an oral report and this makes it more difficult for listeners to follow unless the text is before them. A written report should be given to people in advance, preferably well before it is to be discussed, or, if this is not possible, sufficient time should be allowed for even slow readers to have read and digested it. **The time which would be otherwise spent in reading it aloud can far more usefully be spent on answering questions.**

If a written report **has to** be read aloud, then it should be done reasonably slowly, allowing pauses for digestion of what has been said and the language used.

References

We recommend that information on where to find out more, publications referred to and where to get a copy, dates by which comments must be in, etc. **should always be added at the end of a report.**

Distribution of written reports

Since one report can hardly serve all purposes *(see p. 27),* we suggest that a minimum number of written reports from any one synod should be three or four and that the task of writing them be shared out amongst the GS representatives.

1. For the use of the Diocesan Office and others: a brief factual summary of the decisions made. This can be derived from the Church of England Website (www.cofe.anglican.org). *(See Part A, Co-ordination, p. 15)*

2. A clergy report and/or a laity report

3. Brief notes of the items most important to the diocese for inclusion in parish newsletters, followed by details of where further information can be found, such as websites. Such a report would be useful for putting on a diocesan website, from which it could be downloaded.

These days some GS members circulate their reports by email to others and there seems no reason why a good report should not be used by other GS members or dioceses, providing permission is obtained from the writer.

All reports which have a wide distribution should give the writer's name unless a GS report has been seen approved by all GS members, which is usually too time-consuming to be done (*see also Providing information, p. 10* and *Information Chains, p. 35).*

ORAL REPORTS

Although it is more common at present to give written reports, we would like to recommend a greater use of oral ones. This is because oral reports tend to have a more immediate and personal impact than written reports. They are also easier to adapt on the spot to different audiences and their reactions and to what earlier speakers may have said.

However, we recognize that not many people are able to give excellent talks off the cuff, even if it is the ideal, and that not all are happy doing so from notes either. Those who write their reports in full often do so feeling that otherwise they will not express themselves properly, make inadvertent errors, lose track of what they are saying, or mistime the whole. Usually such mistakes, if they are mistakes – are more obvious to the speaker than to the listener and are outweighed by the personal impact of an oral report. They also usually vanish with practice. Written reports, however, are sometimes essential, especially for those who may find themselves quoted in the media.

We would stress that there is room and a use for **all types of reports** and we would encourage some experimentation.

VISUAL AND OTHER AIDS

Visual and other aids are not essential, but they can be very helpful and add to the interest of a report if they are used properly. **Visual aids, however, are not substitutes for a talk and should not repeat it point by point, nor do speakers need to read out everything on them.**

Check visibility

Make sure both in advance and when the audience is present that the visuals can be clearly seen by all. It is better to do without them if they cannot be seen properly (handouts are a useful standby).

Warning! Visual aids are particularly susceptible to Murphy's Law, so assume that if anything can go wrong, it will. The only way to counter some of the most common hazards are to do **all** of these things:

- Ring up in advance to check the equipment or bring your own.
- Allow plenty of time in advance to go the scene and check that everything works (which means trying it out and projecting/playing the first minute or so of your material).
- Have handouts available if the visuals were essential to the whole.
- **Be prepared to do the talk without any aids at all.**

If something goes wrong

Do not spend more than a maximum of 5 minutes trying to fix it (calling for technical aid if need be). Give up and continue with what you have prepared in anticipation of this happening.

USING POWERPOINT OR SIMILAR COMPUTER-GENERATED VISUALS

For those who are not familiar with the world of information technology, PowerPoint is a current computer program designed to show visual presentations on a screen and in which the computer itself (usually a laptop) is used as the control. It is a favourite in the business world and the image it can convey is business-like and competent. However, for this very reason it may not be always suitable, as some audiences respond better to something more personal and less impressive. It also has to be skilfully used to be effective.

CREATING A CENTRAL RECORD OF REPORTS

It would be extremely useful if dioceses kept some central record of who gives presentations/reports, where, when and what about. With such a record, everyone could know where there were gaps and needs; overlap and repetition could be avoided; members could check when the audience last had a report and on what, etc. Realistically, we can see that it might create practical or other problems, but we would still like to put forward the idea as an ideal.

USING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

It is obvious that information technology is perfectly designed for fast and widespread reporting. At the time of writing, we do not feel that enough use is made of it.

Email

These days, email – especially group email - is the simplest, cheapest and most common communication method for the purpose of spreading information as quickly and widely as possible and we warmly recommend that dioceses and GS members encourage people to use it *(see also Information Chains).*

We recognize that not everyone has, can afford or is able to use email, but we foresee that this situation will change in time, as computers continue to get cheaper and people become more computer literate. However, perhaps there will always be some people without email or whatever technological wonder follows it, and for these (and for those without it now) we recommend trying *Poste-restante email (see p. 36)*

Websites

Another important channel for reports and information is the diocesan website. All dioceses now have one and it is to be hoped that all deaneries and even parishes will do so too in time. However, the websites vary considerably in their usefulness, especially regarding the General Synod and other synods. Our recommendations are based on a comparison of them.

Diocesan Websites

The Church of England's Website, *www.cofe.org* has links to all the diocesan sites. At the time of writing, however, most of these websites give no indication that the diocese has any connection with the General Synod: we discovered only six which mentioned GS members and only four which gave how to contact them as well. We think that the omission gives credence to the idea that the General Synod is in some way a body apart and its members unconnected with the diocese and its congregations. Furthermore, most diocesan websites did not even list the members of their own Diocesan Synod. Many did provide either a link to the Church of England Website or its address, but we think this should be on all. **We consider these are serious omissions which urgently need to be addressed.**

Our recommendations for what should be included on a diocesan website can be found in the General Recommendations in Part A, p. 8.

Equally, although it goes beyond the scope of this Resource Pack, we hope that dioceses will give similar coverage to their own Diocesan Synods and its members. The Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich's Website is currently (2005) the only one to give both its General Synod and its Diocesan Synod members, as well as how to contact them. The St Albans Diocesan Website (2005) is a model of how the bare bones of a synod can be given, accompanied by links if readers wish to go deeper.

Other diocesan websites with useful information on them at present (2005) are:

Chichester: The Diocese's relationship to other synods.
Derby: What is a diocese?
Durham: History of synods
Ely: What is the General Synod?
Leicester: Summary of changes in Parochial Church Council Regulations

Some diocesan websites (e.g. **Chelmsford**) have also set up email forums for discussion.

Data protection

Under the Data Protection Act, members' personal details cannot be given without their written consent and there may be good reasons why a member is reluctant to have a private contact number or address published. Since it is obviously important that representatives should be contactable and people should know how to do this, each diocese should devise a simple way in which this can be done when members do not wish to give their details, e.g. by a central dedicated email address. This should then be put on the diocesan website beside the member's name.

Personal websites

GS members can and do have websites of their own and the Diocesan Website could have a link to these (and *vice versa*).

Setting up a website

Useful information and advice on setting up a website is given on the Diocese of Exeter's and the Diocese of Guildford's websites.

CREATING AND USING INFORMATION CHAINS

Although there is much talk about delegation, we feel that it is used too little in the passing on of information. There seems to be no reason at all why all the work on this is done by a handful of people and every reason why others could help. We therefore recommend that all members of the General Synod, dioceses, deaneries and parishes should belong to an Information Chain which functions rather like a Round Robin letter: information is spread to an ever-widening group of people. We describe below a possible working method.

Setting up an Information Chain

In this, information is passed on **to** or **from** one level (Contact Group) to another, as follows:

GS members ► Diocesan Office
► Diocesan Synod members
Diocesan Synod members ► Deanery Synod members ► PCC's and Parish Contact Officers *(see below)* ► congregation members

The reverse order is used for information going the other way.

> **Example:** Each General Synod member has a specific number of people on the Diocesan Synod who are his/her contacts and with whom information is exchanged (e.g. the next agenda, a GS report, notice of a GS debate which is being passed to the dioceses for discussion, etc.). These Diocesan Synod members in their turn have a specific number of contacts on the Deanery synods, whose responsibility it is to pass on the information to their PCCs and to the Parish Contact Officer *(see below)*.

If email and group emails could be used for this, information could get from a General Synod member to congregations in a very short time.

Parish Contact Officers

Apart from information which is specifically aimed at clergy or churchwardens, there seems no need to burden them further with passing on information that is meant for all, as this could be done by any willing member of the congregation. This member would then be responsible for seeing that information received is as widely spread as possible, either by using email, or printing it out for notices on boards, etc., or any other method. It would, however, be up to every PCC to see that there was such a Parish Contact Officer.

Poste-restante email

If people do not have email, it may not be an insuperable problem as far as the **delivery** of email is concerned. We suggest parishes might find it worth trying to set up a *Post-restante email* system by which anyone who has email and who lives near another who does not could be encouraged to act as a mail-box, printing out any mail received for that person and arranging for its delivery or for it to be picked up. The emails would not be a vast number and would tend only to come at certain periods. Such a person would not even have to be a member of the church, simply someone of goodwill.