



The Evolution of General Synod

**A Review of Planning Processes
within the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada**

Prepared for

**The Primate's Commission: Re-imagining the Church.
Proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st Century -- Structures and Resources**

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Introduction

The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada arose amidst vigorous debate. Dioceses and ecclesiastical provinces debated various ideas about the form and structure of a ‘national’ organization. By design, from its inception, the ‘powers’ of the General Synod have been limited because of differing theological and ecclesiastical views.

Over the decades structures evolved to respond to emerging needs. Strategic planning processes, beginning in 1968, sought to bring clarity to General Synod’s purposes, goals, priorities, and structures. Each planning process achieved some measure of success, but the complexity of Canadian diversity and geography made achieving and holding consensus difficult. *What* the General Synod is for and *how* to best achieve its purpose are topics that generations of church leaders have puzzled over. One-time General Synod Executive Director of Program, Clarke Raymond, often compared General Synod to his elderly aunt’s apartment: she had lived there for over 50 years and accumulated many possessions, making the rooms full to overflowing with stuff!

Similarly, the Canadian General Synod has accumulated topics, issues, and causes all deserving attention, but limited financial resources require choices to be made about focus. Key activities of the General Synod include the transfer of funds from (usually) southern dioceses in support of ministry in (usually) northern dioceses. General Synod also has responsibility to make liturgical resources available to the whole church; and has had a long history of convening conversations about issues of nationwide significance in the church such as liturgical renewal, and of significance to the nation, such as changing understandings of marriage and the rights of Indigenous people.

Because General Synod’s origins are rooted in missionary enterprises, I have chosen to frame this brief overview with categories developed by Bishop Ian Douglas of the Episcopal Church as described in *Waging Reconciliation: God’s Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis* (New York: Church Publishing, 2002). In this book’s seventh chapter *Restoration, Reconciliation, and Renewal in God’s Mission and the Anglican Communion*, Douglas identifies three eras of mission engagement: the Church’s Missions, the Mission of the Church, and the Mission of God. Applying his categories to the history of the General Synod is, I hope, a helpful way to mark the evolution of the structure.

- I: The Church’s Missions 1893 – 1955
- II: The Mission of the Church 1955 – 1992
- III: Re-imagining Mission in the Crucible of Crises 1992 – 2007
- IV: The Mission of God, 2007 – 2024
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Full disclosure: I am not an objective observer of this history. I served on Church House Staff through the last days of the Netten Report (1967) structure and was involved in early stages of development of *Preparing the Way* (1995). And I chaired the committees that brought forward *The Framework* (2001) and *Vision 2019*. This personal involvement leads me to care deeply for

the ministry and mission of the General Synod and to offer this summary to aid the work of the 2023-2025 Primate's Commission: *Re-imagining the Church – Proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st Century, Structures and Resources*.

Sources include the Archives of the General Synod; the sections on the Netten Report, *Preparing the Way*, and *the Framework* adapted from *Appendix B* of the *Report of Vision 2019*¹. Earlier history of the General Synod is comprehensively recorded in chapter 6 of Norman Knowles edited collection of essays *Seeds Scattered and Sown*² and I have quoted from this excellent paper in some depth. I am very grateful to the current General Secretary, Archdeacon Alan T. Perry whose comments corrected historic inaccuracies in an earlier draft.

I have titled this essay “Evolution of General Synod” because, like many complex organizations, it is in an ongoing process of change and adaptation³. Being an organization with a national overview gives General Synod a unique and privileged view of the life of the church and society in Canada. In my time as an employee and then as a volunteer in senior leadership roles I have experienced the General Synod to be like a ‘nerve centre’ for the life of Canadian Anglicanism. At his memorial service in late summer 2023, Archbishop Michael Peers was quoted as saying that one of things he loved about his time as Primate was that, at Church House, before 10 in the morning, he would have had at least 5 interesting conversations. Once you engage a national, and sometimes global perspective you see the complexity of the culture and the relationship of the church to that culture.

Adaptation to a changing environment is a natural and organic process. Theories of adaptive change encourage leaders to ‘get up to the balcony’ to gain a wider perspective of the culture and assumptions of an organization. My hope is that this essay will help bring a broader perspective of the ways that the General Synod has adapted and evolved to changing circumstances and be of help as next steps in the evolution of General Synod emerge.

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¹ <https://archive.anglican.ca/gs2010/wp-content/uploads/019-GS2010-Vision-2019-Report-and-Appendices.pdf>

² Norman Knowles, editor. *Seeds Scattered and Sown: Studies in the History of Canadian Anglicanism*. Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2008

³ The theory of Adaptive leadership was pioneered by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2009. For application of this theory to church systems see Tod Bolsinger's *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* InterVarsity Press, 2015.

I: The Church's Missions 1893 – 1967

“...missions, as dependent outposts of European and North American Christianity, usually in some "far off" part of the world, sought to extend church models and cultural worldviews of the Enlightenment.”⁴

A Colonial Project of the Church of England

Anglicanism in Canada began as an arm of English colonizing forces, modelling its governance and organization on that of the English church. Bishops were appointed by the Crown and funding came from the British Parliament with additional revenue for missions in northern and remote areas through British missionary societies, notably the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG- more Catholic) and the Church Mission Society (CMS- more Protestant).

The first General Synod met in 1893 and was founded to provide such national governance as was required for a church across a growing country. But the foundation of the General Synod had been laid much earlier, in 1851, by a meeting of Canadian bishops in Quebec City, who agreed that ‘the Bishops, Clergy and Laity of the Church of England in each Diocese should meet together in Synod, at such times and in such manner as may be agreed.’ By choosing to include laity in governance followed a growing international trend. Laity been included in synods around the world, including New Zealand (first General Synod in 1859), Australia (first General Synod 1872), South Africa, and the disestablished Church of Ireland (1869). And the Episcopal Church had included laity in its General Convention as far back as 1785.

The Formation of General Synod— ‘not for harmony but for strength’

In 1890 Archbishop Robert Machray hosted a conference in Winnipeg of representatives of the two ecclesiastical provinces and the diocese of New Westminster, and an agreement on a new church hierarchy was reached. The first meeting of General Synod was held in 1893 and Machray was chosen first Primate of Canada with the title archbishop of Rupert's Land. This new General Synod adopted modest goals, in the words of Machray, it existed not for harmony but for strength⁵—strength in supporting the *missions* while not seeking harmony amongst the differing theologies of the mission agencies⁶. It's interesting to note that Machray's intention, as Bishop of Rupert's Land, was to create an indigenous church with Europeans acting only as supervisors.⁷

⁴ Douglas, Ian. *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*. New York: Church Publishing, 2002.

⁵ Quoted in Chapter 6, page 206 from *A Union Not for Harmony but for Strength": The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada (1892-1992)* by Terry Reilly and Norman Knowles. From the Norman Knowles edited book *Seeds Scattered and Sown: Studies in the History of Canadian Anglicanism*. Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2008

⁶ Alan T. Perry writes, “...the general mood in the creation of the General Synod was one of optimism and hope for the future rather than controversy.”

⁷ http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/machray_robert_13E.html

To coordinate mission in an expanding period of colonization the Missionary Society of the Church in Canada⁸ (MSCC)⁹, was formed in September 1902 and run by a General Secretary. The MSCC had the Women's Auxiliary (WA) with its related groups the Junior Auxiliary (JA), Girls Auxiliary (GA) and the Little Helpers as adjacent organizations to raise funds for church missions. Two boards coordinated domestic mission: the General Board of Religious Education (GBRE)¹⁰ (including the AYPAs Anglican Young People's Association) and the Council for Social Service (CSS)¹¹ coordinating social outreach.¹² By 1934 a Pension Plan for clergy was established and became widely subscribed by dioceses.¹³

The two World Wars dominated the first part of the 20th century. General Synod continued its focus on the church's missions in the north and overseas, championed and supported by parish branches of the W.A. and the AYPAs. Local women's associations raised funds for and sent goods to mission churches in the north, while the AYPAs, with its fourfold aims of *Worship, Work, Fellowship and Edification* energized young people, many of whom, in time, became the lay and clergy leaders of the church.

⁸ The MSCC Board of Management still exists and convenes during General Synod and the Council of General Synod and produces financial statements of ongoing MSCC legacies and trusts.

⁹ <https://www.anglican.ca/archives/holdings/fonds/missionary-society-of-the-church-of-england-in-canada-mscc-fonds/>

¹⁰ <https://www.anglican.ca/archives/holdings/fonds/general-board-of-religious-education-gbre-fonds/>

¹¹ <https://www.anglican.ca/archives/holdings/fonds/council-for-social-service-fonds-1917-1971/>

¹² <https://www.anglican.ca/archives/holdings/fonds/council-for-social-service-fonds-1917-1971/>

¹³ <https://archives.anglican.ca/list?q=013+Pension+Office+Corporation+Fonds&p=1&ps=20>

II: The Mission of the Church 1955 – 1992

“Mission was seen less as something done by voluntary associations of Christians and more as the central calling of the Church.”¹⁴

The end of the Second World War brought transformative change to most Western institutions and churches, including the Anglican Church of Canada. The post-war baby boom swelled church pews. Colonialism was revealed as white supremacy and began to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. Long standing social norms faced increasing challenges. The church felt called to address a plethora of emergent social issues.

Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence

Most immediately, for the church, the horror of the Holocaust and the near silence of Christian churches in the face of fascist totalitarianism led to a fundamental re-examination of the theology of mission. New theological formulations were promoted through the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1948), the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962-65) and the Anglican Congress (1963). The Congress, held in Toronto, envisioned a new, non-colonial way to embrace mission--*Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ* (MRI). Seeking to break down paternalism, MRI viewed church to church relationships as partnerships rather than ‘haves’ giving to ‘have nots’.¹⁵ In the *Report of Proceedings* of the Anglican Congress, Professor Eugene Fairweather wrote: “In our time the Anglican Communion has come of age. Our professed nature as a worldwide fellowship of national and regional churches has suddenly become a reality. . . . The full communion in Christ, which has been our traditional tie, has suddenly taken on a totally new dimension. It is now irrelevant to talk of “giving” and “receiving” churches. The keynotes of our time are equality, interdependence, mutual responsibility.” A vision was emerging of churches acting internationally and ecumenically.”¹⁶ Bishop Stephen Neil affirmed: "The age of missions is at an end; the age of mission has begun."¹⁷

Terry Reilly and Norman Knowles describe the many ways that the General Synod incorporated the spirit of the Anglican Congress¹⁸:

“The Anglican Congress contributed to the development of a new understanding of mission. Mission, it concluded, should be conducted on a basis of partnership, equality, and mutual respect that recognized “mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ.” These ideas caused many within General Synod to rethink the Canadian church's work among aboriginal peoples and resulted in the formation of an ad hoc committee with

¹⁴ Douglas, Ian. *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*. New York: Church Publishing, 2002.

¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9MBetjL_bU

¹⁶ As quoted in *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis* by Ian T. Douglas

¹⁷ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 572.

¹⁸ *A Union Not for Harmony but for Strength": The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada (1892-1992)* by Terry Reilly and Norman Knowles. From the Norman Knowles edited book *Seeds Scattered and Sown: Studies in the History of Canadian Anglicanism*. Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2008

representatives from the departments of mission, social service, education, and information. The interdepartmental committee reported to General Synod in 1965 that aboriginal peoples "are claiming the right to have a much greater say in shaping their own destiny." Synod authorized the committee to begin a consultation process with Indigenous peoples, with a view to developing new policies.

In 1967 General Synod commissioned Charles Hendry, the director of social work at the University of Toronto, to prepare a report examining the church's work among the nation's



Aboriginal peoples. The report, *Beyond Traplines: Does the Church Really Care?* documented the failure of the residential schools and criticized the racist assumptions that had informed much of the church's work among aboriginal peoples. The church, Hendry concluded, must stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples in their struggle for political and economic justice. General Synod received the Hendry report in 1969 and endorsed most of its recommendations. Soon afterward, the church

withdrew from the residential schools, appointed a coordinator of Indigenous ministries, and established a council on Indigenous peoples.

While it redefined its relationship with Aboriginal peoples at home, the Canadian church rethought its approach to mission overseas. "How strange it is," Bishop Lakdasa DeMel of Calcutta reminded General Synod in 1965, "that God so often chooses the weak things of the world to teach the strong, the newly converted to teach those who have long experience of Christ."

In 1969 Synod approved the creation of The Primate's World Relief and Development Fund (PWRDF)¹⁹ to provide the church with a means of responding to international crises and to work

¹⁹ PWRDF started in 1958 as a response to the Coal Mine 'bump' in Springhill, Nova Scotia that killed 75 men. The tragedy moved Anglicans and other Canadians to respond with assistance for the stricken families. As a result of this experience, the Church recognized the need for an efficient process to channel assistance quickly in situations of emergency. One year later, The Primate's World Relief Fund was established by the Anglican Church of Canada's General Synod, named for the Primate; ratified at General Synod in 1969. <https://pwrdf.org/about/in-the-beginning/>

on an ongoing basis to relieve conditions of poverty, hunger, and injustice around the world. The formation of PWRDF signaled a shift of emphasis from evangelism and conversion to social welfare and social reform. Indigenous empowerment, humility, listening, and ecumenical cooperation were now to characterize the church's work abroad.

Other social and political issues came before General Synod in the 1960s. "Ours is not a peaceful world," the Primate, Archbishop Howard Clark told Synod in 1965. Delegates agreed. They passed a resolution condemning war as "incompatible with the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ," and calling upon the Canadian government to work to restrict nuclear testing and to press for "effective international control and inspection of nuclear weapons and other armaments."

A committed ecumenist, Clark believed that Anglicans should work with other denominations whenever possible, and in 1965 he encouraged General Synod to approve a general plan for union with the United Church.

There was enormous growth in church structures to facilitate the needs of growing congregations and this newfound sense of the mission of the church. Like other North American denominations, the General Synod staff, programs, and bureaucracy expanded to keep pace with demands for church resources. In 1955, the church's name was changed from "the Church of England in the Dominion of Canada" to "the Anglican Church of Canada". In 1957 the Anglican Foundation was established to help fund efforts in mission and ministry across the country.

The Netten Report

By the mid 1960s it became clear that the structure of boards within a missionary society was no longer serving the needs of a growing church. Price Waterhouse was contracted to do a study. Released in 1968, *The Netten Report*—named for Edward Netten, the management consultant who guided the process—reviewed the functions and workings of key national church bureaucracies (missions, social service, and religious education) and recommended that "administrative routines, budgetary practices, compensation procedures and personnel policies ... be basically uniform throughout Church House (the church's national office in Toronto)." The recommended changes were intended to eliminate duplication and improve the stewardship of funds. Seeking not to follow the colonial model which would suggest the perpetuation of independent missionary agencies, there was an emerging view that Netten heard and amplified that there is **one church and one mission**. Archdeacon Jim Boyles General Secretary from 1993 to 2005 comments, "One major loss with the amalgamation of MSCC and the other bodies within General Synod was the direct engagement with parishioners with the missionary enterprise, as typified in the duplex envelopes. From the 1970s onward the General Synod has struggled with various programs to reconnect with Anglicans as the structures changed, and indeed as the concept of mission changed."

Netten examined dozens of General Synod committees and commissions that had proliferated over the years and recommended the merger or disbanding of most. to form a smaller number of standing committees, reducing them from 28 to 4-- Organization (dealing with meetings of the General Synod, canons etc.), Doctrine and Worship, Inter-church Relations and Theological Education. It also led to a more defined job description for the General Secretary. Netten recommended that the Primate be relieved of all diocesan responsibilities and serve full-time as the national church's chief executive officer. Netten further recommended that General Synod's existing boards and councils be replaced by a new committee system that reported to a program committee, which was mandated to uphold the church's vision and mission. The changes proposed in Netten's report were sweeping and controversial – and ultimately, adopted.²⁰



A Robust Structure to contain Changes and Controversies

Remarkably, this structure sustained the church's work for more than half a century, providing avenues for the General Synod to navigate through storms of controversy like the ordination of women, affirming policies in favour of ending apartheid in South Africa, and encouraging liturgical revision resulting in the 1985 publication of the *Book of Alternative Services*.

Increasing focus on issues of public social responsibility generated a number of ecumenical social justice coalitions. Awareness of Indigenous rights led the General Synod to champion Indigenous self-determination, and the creation of a Native Ministry Council to bring Anglican Indigenous people together.

Combatting competitiveness in raising funds for assisted (missionary) dioceses, the Council of the North was formed to bring bishops and executive officers together to administer financial grants with greater transparency. A simmering conflict began between the bishops in the Council and Indigenous leaders critical of the colonizing assumptions within church structures.

The national office continued to expand. World Mission and the founding of the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund expressed a new engagement with the global realities of inequity sparked by the Anglican Congress of 1963. Personnel services for dioceses were provided with a centralized clergy directory enabling bishops to learn about clergy across the country without relying on the 'old boys network'. National staff were appointed to work in areas of congregational development, youth ministry (the old AYPAs dismantled in favour of a regionally based Anglican Youth Movement), women's ministries (the WA was integrated with other women's work in the Anglican Church Women (ACW)), social justice within Canada, international regional desks for World Mission. Church House at 600 Jarvis Street, Toronto was filled with professional staff. The Anglican Book Centre (ABC) with a publishing division and an active mail order business sold theological books, church furnishings, liturgical accoutrements, giftware, and other resources across the country. The ABC retail store became a meeting place for Anglicans in Toronto and visitors to the region.

²⁰ See Knowles and Reilly p. 224

Anglicans in Mission

In the early 1980s an ambitious financial campaign raised over \$20 million dollars for dioceses and the General Synod. *Anglicans in Mission* was a high point for the national church generating much needed funds to supplement clergy pensions, resource assisted dioceses, and provide much needed money for dioceses and parishes from coast to coast to coast. In a time when video production was a prohibitively expensive proposition for most dioceses, Anglican Video was established as a way to communicate effectively. Amongst many projects Anglican Video documented the evolution of the Indigenous church through convocations, gatherings, and Sacred Circles.

By 1990 stories of abuse at government funded, church run residential schools were emerging and slowly were being heard by church leaders locally and nationally. At the National Executive Council, meeting in Winnipeg in 1990, survivors told their stories of physical, spiritual, cultural, and sexual abuse in the schools. The missionary enterprise, once thought of as the heart of General Synod work, was being held up for re-examination. Many in the church, including some national leaders, found it impossible to pivot from pride in the mission enterprise, to shame at the revealed outcome.

A Mission Statement

Winds of change were blowing; by the late 1980s dioceses were reducing their contributions to General Synod since their revenues were plummeting as parish membership declined precipitously, continuing a trend that had begun in the late 1960s. In 1992, the Long-Range Planning Committee, led by Archdeacon Bob MacRae, developed a mission statement, approved by the National Executive Council which, at the time of this writing (2024) still stands as the official mission statement of the Anglican Church of Canada:

As a partner in the worldwide Anglican Communion and in the universal Church, we proclaim and celebrate the gospel of Jesus Christ in worship and action.

We value our heritage of biblical faith, reason, liturgy, tradition, bishops and synods, and the rich variety of our life in community.

We acknowledge that God is calling us to greater diversity of membership, wider participation in ministry and leadership, better stewardship in God's creation and a stronger resolve in challenging attitudes and structures that cause injustice.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves to respond to this call in love and service and so more fully live the life of Christ.²¹

²¹ <https://archives.anglican.ca/link/official1886>

III: Re-imagining Mission in the Crucible of Crises 1992 - 2007

Preparing the Way 1992- 2002

'*Preparing the Way*', the deepest examination of the Canadian Church since the Netten Report, began in 1992 when General Synod authorized the National Executive Committee to embark on a strategic planning process that would direct the national church's focus for the coming decade. *Preparing the Way* became the strategic plan that guided General Synod's work—what was done and how it was done—between 1995 and 2004. The plan acknowledged that the church was experiencing increased difficulty choosing priorities amid declining resources.

After a three-year-long process that sought input from various groups by asking, "What is important to you about the church? What is God calling us to do as a church?" the consultation noted widespread concern about the church's dwindling numbers and a decrease in funds available to the national church. Baptismal and death statistics showed that the church's population was declining rapidly, and its membership was older than the Canadian average. Further research, supported by consultants from McKinsey and Company, showed that while parish income was up, more of it was going to maintain buildings, with less to dioceses, and hence to General Synod. Those surveyed called for radical change in the national church.

Suzanne Lawson, then Executive Director of Program, noted that survey respondents confirmed that the church's national structures were out of touch with the local level. There were clear statements from dioceses about increasing dissatisfaction. Diocesan leaders did not feel listened to and wanted a more direct say in setting national church priorities. The research found one area of unanimity—all agreed that the pace of change is not slowing.²²

Preparing the Way resulted in dramatic changes for the focus of the national church. General Synod began to concentrate its resources on what it could do best: nurturing and building overseas partnerships, advocacy for social justice issues, providing information and financial services to dioceses, developing ecumenical relationships with other churches, and clarifying Anglican identity. My essay *From Colonialism through Partnership to Decolonization*²³ further explores the growth and contraction of World Mission in the General Synod. Using the principle that local work is best done locally, other domestic work, like congregational development and stewardship education, was shifted back to dioceses.

Alongside the focus on international partnerships, *Preparing the Way* proposed an overhaul of the governance and staff structures of General Synod. The National Executive Council was reduced in size and renamed the Council of General Synod. The staff at Church House was reduced in size in response to reducing amounts of income from dioceses. In addition, *Preparing*

²²<https://archives.anglican.ca/list?q=%22%22Preparing+the+Way%22+planning+process+launches+General+Synod+into+next+century&p=1&ps=20>

²³ Chapter 6 in *Partnership as Mission: Essays in Memory of Ellie Johnson* edited Kenneth Gray and Maylanne Maybee. Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023

the Way recommended that the General Synod find ways to strengthen commitment to domestic mission in partnership with the Council of the North, and work with the Council of the North to move toward self-sufficiency.

Preparing the Way was approved by the General Synod of 1995 and the changes proposed were implemented. But two crises emerged even as the plan was being adopted.

Residential Schools Litigation

The General Synod and some dioceses were sued by the Federal Government over abuses at Indian Residential Schools. Survivors of the schools had sued the government; the government in turn ‘third parted’ the churches into the litigation. Legal and settlement costs threatened to bankrupt the General Synod and some dioceses. The new Council of General Synod seriously debated surrendering national structures and declaring bankruptcy. General Synod 2001 added to the strategic plan an additional goal—to affirm healing and reconciliation with indigenous peoples.

Because of uncertainty of the future of General Synod, several related agencies previously part of General Synod chose to separately incorporate so that their assets would not be available in the event of the bankruptcy, including the Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund, the Pension Corporation, and the Anglican Foundation.

A Settlement Agreement signed in 2003²⁴ between the Government of Canada and General Synod and on behalf of dioceses allowed national work in healing and reconciliation amongst indigenous people in Canada. The agreement capped the church's liability in residential schools litigation at \$25 million. In four months, 30 dioceses unanimously approved the agreement and agreed to contribute to the settlement fund, many without a dissenting vote. A separate entity was formed, the *Anglican Church of Canada Resolution Corporation*, to administer the settlement fund. Canadian dioceses made individual decisions on how to contribute their share. In total, Canadian dioceses were called on to contribute \$22 million, and that goal was met. General Synod contributed the remaining \$3 million. The agreement moved litigation over residential schools out of the courts and into an alternative dispute resolution.²⁵

The settlement agreement was not without controversy; Indigenous Anglicans advised against signing the agreement because of release terms within the financial compensation sections which they thought were unfair and could restrict future legal settlements. Their journey is well documented in a 2019 report *One Step on a Journey: The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and the Anglican Church of Canada – Lessons Learned*²⁶

²⁴ <http://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/All-Parties-Lessons-Learned-ACoC-FINAL.pdf>

²⁵ <https://archives.anglican.ca/list?q=Settlement+Agreement+with+the+Federal+Government&p=1&ps=20>

²⁶ <http://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/All-Parties-Lessons-Learned-ACoC-FINAL.pdf>

Blessing Committed Same Sex Partnerships

With the legalization of same sex marriage in 2005, Canadian society adopted a more affirming stance with lesbian and gay couples. This change eclipsed but did not resolve a deep conflict within the Canadian Anglican church. While increasing numbers of clergy and laity were seeking approvals for liturgical rites to offer church's blessing on committed same sex relationships, others argued that this was in violation of traditional Christian faith. The depth of disagreement led to the departure of congregations from diocesan parishes and ignited deep divisions amongst Canadian bishops. It was another factor in reducing income to General Synod from dioceses. Canadian Anglicans were not facing this alone; similar movements were happening in the Episcopal Church and churches in the United Kingdom.²⁷

Serving God's World, Strengthening the Church—The Framework and Letting Down the Nets 2001-2007

In 2001, General Synod again decided to take the pulse of the church calling for an “intentional listening process”. The church enlisted the Environics Research Group to carry out a qualitative research study of the church. For its 2002 study, Environics conducted 11 focus groups: four among clergy and seven among parishioners. The researchers also met with the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples, the Council of General Synod and one diocesan youth synod. Environics also completed a separate telephone survey of 1,200 randomly selected Anglicans. The “intentional listening process” was intended to provide a “qualitative snapshot” of the church at a specific point in time. Environics deliberately avoided using a pre-determined set of questions; the open-ended research framework was intended to allow issues, concerns, and themes to emerge naturally.

The results of the Environics focus groups were published in a 2002 book, *Stained Glass, Sweet Grass, Hosannas & Songs*²⁸. The report shone a spotlight on a laity that thought the national church was out of touch with the needs of those in parishes; as was noted in *Preparing the Way*, lay people were concerned about the challenges of declining church attendance (especially young people), aging congregations and “competition” from evangelical churches. Respondents also registered their anxiety about ongoing litigation and settlements regarding native residential schools and the debate over the role of gays and lesbians in the church.

Clergy polled by Environics were concerned about many of the same issues as their parishioners, but they also admitted to worrying about the viability of their local church communities. Both clergy and lay people expressed a need for communications, leadership, and vision from the national church on issues both inside and outside the church.

²⁷ This is a much too brief summary of a complex and ongoing controversy within the Anglican Church of Canada. A fuller exploration of issues of marriage within Canadian Anglicanism can be found in Alan T Perry's article, *Marriage in the Anglican Church of Canada 1860-2004 and beyond* in the *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society*, XLVII (2005), pp. 197-221

²⁸ Preiner, Sally Edmonds. *Stained Glass, Sweet Grass, Hosannas & Songs*. Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2002.

The loss of services from General Synod in supporting ministry at the local level was felt acutely. Dioceses were struggling with budget difficulties, and most were unable to pick up the work that the General Synod had dropped. While *Preparing the Way*'s clarity about what the focus on the work of the national church was welcome, the twin crises of dealing with the historic abuse in residential schools and the conflict of differing views of the place of gay lesbian folks in the church was affecting grassroots Anglicans acutely.

In 2003, as *Preparing the Way* was reaching the end of its mandate, the Council of General Synod considered extending the existing strategic plan but instead decided to work on a new plan. Following a period of consultation with dioceses, *Serving God's World, Strengthening the Church* (2004-2010) became the "framework" that guided the work of the church for the two triennia leading up to General Synod 2010. Adopted at General Synod 2004, the framework began with the premise, "We envision a church that is growing in membership, faith and service in God's world."

Serving God's World recommended that the core mission identified in the 1995 strategic plan continue for six more years. After hearing during its consultations that many dioceses missed and needed the services that the national church had downloaded to them with *Preparing the Way*, the framework also proposed adding new initiatives: programs to serve local mission in congregational development, stewardship education, youth ministry, and leadership development. The new initiatives, however, would only be added as resources became available through an accompanying stewardship plan *Letting Down the Nets*. The plan was called a "framework" rather than a strategic plan to emphasize flexibility in its implementation. It identified seven major priorities:

1. Strengthening and developing Anglican identity
2. The development of local communities through networks and other programs
3. More effective communication of church stories
4. Building and strengthening relationships with indigenous peoples
5. Developing and strengthening the church's financial capacity
6. Developing partnerships to better advocate for social justice
7. Continued support for the church's international partners.

Funding for new initiatives would come not from diocesan assessment but from targeted financial campaigns. The Financial Management and Development Committee, buoyed by the national experience of raising the funds required for the settlement agreement, believed that Canadian Anglicans were willing to be generous when they understood a need and asked directly for their financial support. Archdeacon John Robertson, national Planned Giving Officer said, "Our big challenge during the next six years will be to give strong, practical leadership to 'raising the funds required to implement the Framework'. The implementation of this plan will require new funding to support both existing work and new areas of mission and ministry." More than once, when asked how the Framework would finance new envisioned efforts the response was "Go fishing and let down the nets." In other words, seek directed funding for initiatives. While this was a good idea, it had limited success.

IV: The Mission of God 2007 – 2024

...the Church was seen as being an agent at best...to God's intervention
in the wider struggles of the world.²⁹

Vision 2019

Vision 2019 grew out of a resolution at the November 2007 meeting of the Council of General Synod. It called for a strategic planning process that would guide the work of the General Synod from 2010-2019. The process began with an advertisement in the *Anglican Journal*, the church's national newspaper, calling for volunteers with specific skills and experience. The six-member 2019 Vision Planning Task Force first met in March 2008. It was instructed to work with the church's Planning and Agenda Team, a group which monitors and co-ordinates national work, and the Governance Working Group, a body which reviews the governance of the General Synod. The task force was instructed to prepare a draft plan and if approved by CoGS, the plan would be presented to General Synod in June 2010.

The task force enlisted the help of General Synod communications staff, who hoped to build on the success of the 2008 *Amazing Grace* initiative. That unity-building project encouraged Anglican parishes and other groups across the country to video record themselves singing the iconic hymn and share the recording with the rest of the church via the Web. The group used some of its strategies from *Amazing Grace* to reach the greatest number of Anglicans possible through an imaginative engagement called, *Dream the Church*.³⁰

The Primate encouraged Anglicans to participate, "Vision 2019 is an opportunity to say, 'here's what I think our church needs to be about.'" People were asked to respond to a two-part question: *Where is your church now and where do you want the Anglican Church of Canada to be in 2019?*

The question, according to the Vision 2019 team, was deliberately left open-ended to give respondents the opportunity to respond, "from the heart." In contrast with many survey models which are hierarchical, the task force and staff designed what they described as a "flatter" polling model, actively inviting anyone to respond. By doing so, they hoped to open the process to the whole church and make the survey more democratic.

²⁹ Douglas, Ian. *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*. New York: Church Publishing, 2002.

³⁰ <https://archive.anglican.ca/v2019/yourstory/>



Staff produced promotional YouTube videos, posters, postcards, *Anglican Journal* ads, bulletin inserts and an insert that was included in the pensions newsletter to reach retired clergy. They sought co-operation and coverage from diocesan newspapers and encouraged churches to mark a “Vision 2019 Sunday.” They invited participation from individuals, parishes, Sunday Schools, theological schools, diocesan and provincial synods, active and retired bishops. Stories were also gathered and recorded at the August meeting of the Sacred Circle, a national gathering of Anglican Indigenous Peoples.

Some groups framed their response using a mission study, prepared for use in parishes throughout Lent 2009, which was based on the Five Marks of Mission for the Anglican Communion:

1. to proclaim the good news of the kingdom.
2. to teach, baptize and nurture new believers.
3. to respond to human need by loving service.
4. to seek to transform unjust structures of society.
5. to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Respondents were invited to tell their stories by letter, e-mail, video, or telephone. By the deadline, there were 1,007 submissions, including individual responses, parish responses, organizational responses, and comments. The responses ranged from brief telephone messages and short, hand-written letters to slick videos, from lengthy letters to simple collages by Sunday School classes. Submissions were made public via the General Synod website³¹.

The sheer volume of responses meant that help was required to process the information. Marleen Morris & Associates, a Vancouver-based consulting firm, was contracted to synthesize and analyze the responses. Calling *Vision 2019* a “remarkable undertaking,” Morris processed the submissions using special software that helped her to identify trends and themes in the

³¹ <https://archive.anglican.ca/v2019/>

submissions. Morris identified eight themes in the responses:

1. young people and young families.
2. inclusiveness.
3. tradition.
4. worship.
5. outreach.
6. new energy and ideas.
7. growth and decline.
8. handling differences.

Ms. Morris also used the five Marks of Mission as a lens to examine the responses. Although awareness of the marks themselves was quite low, Morris found widespread support for the priorities of the marks. In October 2009, the *Vision 2019* Task Force organized the first draft report by grouping Morris's data into four "clusters" of visions that emerged:

1. A welcoming, diverse, and inclusive church
2. A church engaged in mission.
3. A church that reclaims the depth and breadth of Anglicanism
4. A church with the organizational capacity to be faithful and effective.

This first draft was made available for public comment and the task force sought from the House of Bishops and the Council of General Synod. As well, committee members conducted 22 stakeholder interviews. Marleen Morris & Associates again analyzed and organized this data for the committee. In January 2010 the report was organized with a Vision Statement, seven priorities under the heading "Living into God's Mission" and five practices under "A Church Ready for God's Mission." Approved by the Council of General Synod, *Vision 2019* was forwarded to General Synod.

Vision

A people seeking to know, love, and follow Jesus in serving God's mission.

Priorities

1. Develop leadership education for mission, evangelism, and ministry.
2. Support ministry through the Council of the North
3. Walk with Indigenous peoples on a journey of healing and wholeness.
4. Work toward peace and justice.
5. Engage young people in mutual growth for mission.
6. Enliven our worship.
7. Be leaders in the Anglican Communion and in ecumenical actions.

Practices

1. Create structures that work for the church now and for God's mission.
2. Improve and enliven communications.
3. Keep an eye on statistical trends.
4. Gather financial resources to equip ministry across Canada.
5. Build bridges, not fences.

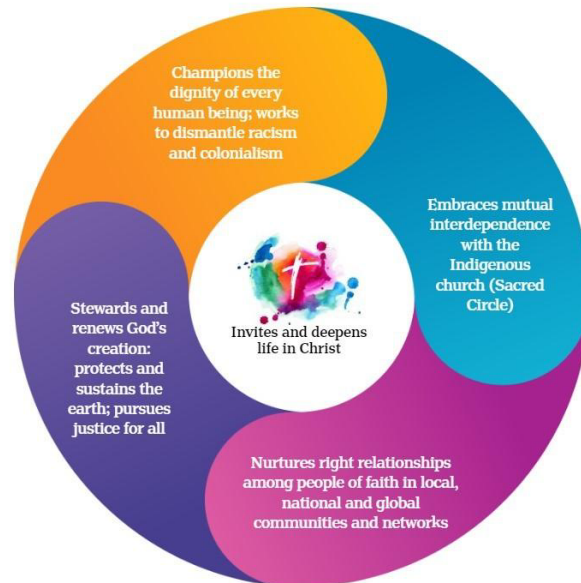
It was a video, produced by Anglican Video, that propelled *Vision 2019* to its nearly unanimous adoption at General Synod 2010.³² What *Vision 2019* provided was a bridge into a future beyond the ‘church’s missions’ (Netten report) and the mission of the church (*Preparing the Way* and the *Framework*). *Vision 2019* affirmed that the mission of the church is the mission of God— “follow Jesus in serving God’s mission” (from the Vision statement).

Reflecting on *Vision 2019*, in a 2020 *Anglican Journal* article³³, then General Secretary Michael Thompson said, “There was a kind of hopefulness to *Vision 2019* that I don’t think has been betrayed. People who are close to *Vision 2019* say it established a kind of a mood and a direction for ministries of General Synod that continues to be valuable.” Thompson pointed to accomplishments: “...in the decade since *Vision 2019* was adopted, the Indigenous Anglican church has become much more prominent. And in 2017, after having created the new part-time position of church statistician, the church got a full set of statistics from the dioceses for the first time in many years, highlights of which were released this fall. Another “win,” he says, is the progress the church has made in bridge-building, despite the many differences that exist within the Anglican Church of Canada— which Thompson calls “more a quilt than a blanket.”

He also noted the plan’s deficiencies: “Among the weaknesses of the plan, Thompson says, was an absence of “deep consultation and deep integration with diocesan ministries.” He says he hopes the church’s next strategic plan will engage the dioceses more fully.

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JacrWZxAhgE>

³³ <https://anglicanjournal.com/looking-back-on-vision-2019/>



A new planning process, a successor to *Vision 2019* was formed in the autumn of 2019. The global pandemic provided both a time and a context for a Strategic Planning Working Group, to gather hundreds of Anglicans from across Canada to engage in conversations online to share their hopes, dreams, and visions for the future mission of their national church. From these listening sessions emerged five transformational aspirations adopted by General Synod in July 2023.

Our Anglican Church of Canada aspires to:

- Invite and deepen life in Christ.
- Champion the dignity of every human being; work to dismantle racism and colonialism.
- Embrace mutual interdependence with the Indigenous church (Sacred Circle)
- Nurture right relationship among people of faith in local, national, and global communities and networks.
- Steward and renew God's creation: protect and sustain the earth; pursue justice for all.

V: Reimagining the Church:
Proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st Century, Structures & Resources,
2023-2025

In his 2020 interview with the *Anglican Journal*, Archdeacon Michael Thompson spoke about the need to address the church's structures. Commenting on *Vision 2019*, Thompson noted that the church had fallen short of implementing the kind of restructuring envisioned by the plan (reductions of the number of committees, for example, proposed by a January 2013 consultation). Thompson also says that, though he recognizes the church's structure at the diocesan level is outside the jurisdiction of General Synod, important discussions about it may be necessary...“I wouldn't be the first person to notice that there are questions about whether the existing structures of dioceses, and the number of them, and how they're constituted is...the most effective way to carry out God's mission, and on that particular part of the land.”

In a similar vein, Archbishop Linda Nicholls, in an article in the *Living Church* underlined a need now to look again at the national church structures, gesturing to the work of her Commission, “*A newly formed Primate's Commission in Canada is considering our governance and structures for the future.*”³⁴ A Primate's Commission-- *Reimagining the Church – Proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st Century, Structures and Resources* has been formed with this as a mandate:

“We have a national church structure and model of governance created in a different time and context. If we were to develop a national church today – what would we imagine? Where are the gaps? Where are the needs given the available resources? Emerging demographics? What alternatives do we see?”

With a very short time frame, this newly formed commission is already in conversation about what changes to propose.

Observations and Questions:

Chronicling the history of General Synod has led me to some observations and questions.

Observations:

The Covid-19 pandemic brought disturbances to church structures generally and to the Anglican Church of Canada and its General Synod. While there was generous financial support from the government of Canada to continue employment through the pandemic, patterns of participation in parishes and congregations were acutely affected through the pandemic and since the lifting of restrictions have, in most instances, not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Because a recommended *Vision 2019* practice was to keep an eye on statistics, Canadian Anglicans were, even prior to the pandemic, very aware of how membership was in a precipitous decline³⁵. Yet

³⁴ <https://covenant.livingchurch.org/2023/12/06/synodality-and-a-servant-church/>

³⁵ <https://anglicanjournal.com/church-attendance-dropped-faster-during-the-pandemic-but-parishes-are-adapting-statistician/>

there is an adaptive resilience, according to statistics officer Canon Neil Elliot: “But more importantly the church has shown that it is able to adapt. First, with the explosion of online services, implemented in response to lockdowns. 750 out of 1550 churches recorded holding an online service of some kind in 2020 and 550 of those maintaining them through 2021. Then there are the host of different types of non-standard church services many parishes have begun offering in increasing numbers and varieties.”

The General Synod is at the end of a funding pipeline: if you follow the revenue that annually comes to the General Synod, it begins as contributions from parishioners in parishes across the country, a portion of which goes as an assessment to the diocese who in turn make a ‘proportional gift’ to the work of the General Synod. With declining numbers of active parishioners, parish, and diocesan income and hence General Synod income is annually decreasing. Some of the shortfall can be recouped through investment and endowment income, but even with parish resilience in other forms of worship, the long-term financial outlook for General Synod is bleak.³⁶

Add to this the built-in conflictual nature of General Synod, present from its origins in 1893 and continuing throughout all its history. The last two meetings of the General Synod, 2019 had some memorable moments of unity and harmony—like the affirmation of the Sacred Circle and the elevating of the National Anglican Indigenous Bishop to the position of Archbishop (2019); and the successful assembly with Canadian Lutherans (ELCIC) and the adoption of full communion with the Moravians (2023). But those moments were quickly eclipsed by awkward and painful journeys through legislation. General Synod’s legislative process can be awkward and prove frustrating for those who are advocating for change. For example, the Marriage Canon (2019) and the Canon on the Primacy (2023) were considered and defeated by because the Order of Bishops vote did not achieve the necessary 2/3 majority required for a change in canon. This has affected the life of the House of Bishops and their reputation across the church.

Changing structures is difficult: *Preparing the Way*, for example, proposed organizational changes some of which stuck (like the name and composition of the Council of General Synod), but their proposed focus turned out to be too narrow, requiring the *Framework* to put back into General Synod ministries that *Preparing the Way* had eliminated. Within the current context, the identification of transformational aspirations by the Strategic Planning Working Group offers a unique opportunity for the General Synod and the church nationally to focus a conversation on *how* and *where* these aspirations can best find life and energy. The General Synod’s ability to convene conversations and consultations is an invaluable resource to facilitate this moving forward.

The life of the Anglican Church of Canada takes place within a relationship between dioceses, provinces, and the General Synod. From the founding of General Synod, provinces and dioceses have taken great care to ensure that the General Synod is contained within very specific boundaries, for it not to become a ‘national church’ *per se* but to be responsible for specific areas

³⁶ https://anglicanjournal.com/cogs-ponders-financial-future-as-revenues-drop/?fbclid=IwAR2x4_WPzzU-d3_sM1nDEOeIrxvTzZ8FTIbfQwGCytEsZC5iFCihX47h6Y

of church life and mission. The Anglican Church of Canada is a confederation resembling civil Canadian governance. Just as Provinces and metropolitan areas, within Canada, are granted specific powers not ceded to the federal government, similarly, and in some cases even more, the General Synod's powers are limited and focussed. For example, the Primate, although styled as an Archbishop, has no jurisdictional authority. Financial support of General comes as 'proportional gifts' rather than assessments—voluntary donations rather than 'taxes'.

Within this structure it is never helpful to refer to 'the national church' when working within the General Synod—such terminology inevitably activates unconscious institutional memory of choosing a federation model of governance. The transformational aspirations provide an avenue for a new conversation amongst the partners within the Anglican Church of Canada—General Synod, Ecclesiastical Provinces (including, now the Sacred Circle), and Dioceses/Territories. Such a conversation could both celebrate the reality of dispersed authority throughout the church and seek to find ways to strengthen the mission of the church in living into the transformational aspirations.

Questions:

- How best can dioceses work together so that the central aspiration of inviting and deepening life in Christ can be more effectively engaged? What are the distinctively Anglican ways that contribute to inviting and deepening life in Christ? Is there a role for General Synod in this?
- What are the policies and program initiatives that enable championing the dignity of every human being; and what are best practices in work to dismantle racism and colonialism?
- Could funding for Council of the North dioceses/territories be moved to Ecclesiastical Provinces and the Sacred Circle as one way to promote mutual interdependence more effectively with the Indigenous church (Sacred Circle)?
- What are the most effective ways to inform and educate Canadian Anglicans about the reach of the church internationally and ecumenically to nurture right relationship among people of faith in local, national, and global communities and networks?
- Given the climate crisis, how can resources be best stewarded so that Canadian Anglicans become leaders in work to steward and renew God's creation: protect and sustain the earth; pursue justice for all.

This is but a beginning list. Convening and facilitating conversations about these aspirations, already agreed to, could be an instrument to aid in the renewal and rejuvenation of the General Synod and perhaps begin a process of devolving some powers and responsibilities to provinces and dioceses. The Primate's Commission is to enable the church to discern how the form of General Synod can express the function of proclaiming the gospel to this and future generations.

As a way to engage this work, and to spark discussion, I conclude with the following 5 intentionally provocative statements³⁷:

1. General Synod has engaged in formal strategic planning exercises for the past thirty years. It has generally been successful in articulating goals and priorities which won approval at the time. It has only rarely executed those goals and priorities in conformity with the plan. Generally, General Synod's adherence to strategic planning must be deemed a failure.
2. General Synod was created to be the weaker partner in a strong alliance of dioceses. The dioceses exercise the greatest amount of power in the determination of any strategic plan, either by funding it (or not) or by allocating diocesan resources in alignment with it. General Synod planning has not always recognized this limitation.
3. Membership and participation in the Anglican Church of Canada has been in decline since the late 60s. In the last two decades this decline has become precipitous. Every strategic plan has included steps intended to arrest this decline. None has had any demonstrable impact.
4. The General Synod tends to look abroad, to other Anglican churches, for inspiration and example. It might also consider the situation of other Protestant churches here in Canada, all of which are following similar patterns. The church does not exist apart from the national culture it inhabits.
5. An apt metaphor for the church at this time might be ageing, with its attendant change in energy, capacity, and focus. Is it time to de-acquisition and downsize some structures to enable new possibilities to emerge? Is this the framing that should guide current planning?

³⁷ I am grateful to Doug Tindal, one time Director of Communications for the General Synod, for his editing and feedback. and particularly for these 5 provocative summary statements.