

CHURCH TIMES

Wider still . . .

EVERYONE acknowledges that the Anglican Communion is an odd creature, a loose group of autonomous national and regional Provinces that pay fealty to the Archbishop of Canterbury (until they don't), but allow him little more power than to define the group's membership. Attempts in recent decades to strengthen the structural ties between the Provinces, by, for example, elevating the status and authority of the Primates' Meeting, have run against the counter impulse towards the devolution of power.

It is often forgotten that this latter impulse has prevailed in the Communion since its earliest days. One of the "key partners" listed in the consultation document, released last week, on the formulation of the Crown Nominations Commission (CNC) for choosing the next Archbishop of Canterbury is the standing committee of the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC). Its roots can be traced back to the primacy of Randall Davidson (Archbishop from 1903 to 1928), and the formation of an elected consultative body to advise on questions of faith and order. It was described in 1920 as "a voluntary nexus for the whole of the Anglican Communion though possessing no power to enforce its decisions". The ACC is a body that might wish to take longer than the 11 weeks allowed for this consultation, given the implications of the proposal to give five Communion representatives a say in the next Canterbury CNC. The consultation document says humbly: "the big picture is, perhaps, too big for us to address, and we have to start somewhere, even if we are unsure where." If the ACC is not there to consider the big picture, we wonder what its purpose is.

For the feeling that we have on reading the consultation document is of stepping into the middle of a conversation. The bit that we seem to have missed was when people decided that the Archbishop of Canterbury was to remain the pivotal figure in the Communion. (This image, incidentally, is Davidson's, who wrote in 1912: "One feels at once the necessity for something of the nature of a central pivot — a pivot which takes tangible shape as a man, an Archbishop. . . I am not speaking even indirectly of any question about jurisdiction, however shadowy. I am speaking about a pivot, not a pope.") The consultation document recognises, in fact, that this bit of the conversation is still to be had: "The Church of England and the Communion cannot escape asking why a British cleric should always be *primus inter pares*." But it suggests that welcoming Communion representatives into the next CNC constitutes "a small step, and a first step". It is, however, a step in a particular direction, and will be seen by many as a move to secure the pivotal role for Canterbury — otherwise, why involve the Communion in the Archbishop's selection?

The reference in the consultation document to God's "call to be one" is a reminder, especially in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, that the status quo while it contains disunity (i.e. denominationalism) cannot be allowed to prevail. The problem with structural change, however, is knowing which thread to pick at first. Given the focus of this week, every argument used in the document in favour of greater international involvement in the CNC might be marshalled just as convincingly in favour of adding ecumenical representatives. After all, as long as establishment persists, the Archbishop of Canterbury is expected to speak for all Christian Churches, if not for all faiths.

The advantages of widening the representation on the CNC are many. The experience, say, of other Primates would be invaluable. An increase in lay representation would be good. A better balance of gender, race, sexual identity, church tradition, age, and political persuasion ought to be sought. Contributors from the rest of the British Isles would be welcome, despite the proposal's seeming bias against them. In the end, though, members of the CNC do not function as representatives, but as individuals, charged to uncover the will of God. True, the Holy Spirit can work through their selection as well as through their deliberations; but the Spirit can also work through the existing process, which includes extensive vacancy-in-see consultations.

The crucial thing is to see this new proposal in context. It is hard to deny the attraction of strengthening the unity of the Communion in such an immediate and practical fashion. Those who respond to the consultation, however, should ask how this "small step" advances the greater objective: of a united Communion that draws on its global experience and that of Christian partners to enable the gospel to flourish in every location.

100 Years Ago can be found on page 47



Is a Zoom rite a valid form of communion?

The pandemic has led to eucharistic experiments online. But where is the Bishops' guidance, asks **Richard Burridge**

A SOUTH African Jesuit friend started it on Facebook: "So I have been wondering who to ask . . . what is the range of consecration? If I have the elements in front of me, and you are consecrating in the knowledge that that is the case, why would it not work?"

I had stepped down as Dean of King's College London in July 2019, after 25 years' service, to concentrate on research and writing. Yet, during unpacking, everything was shutting down as Covid-19 spread; even the church in which I received communion every Wednesday closed its doors at the Archbishops' instruction (not realising that it would never reopen).

So, I experimented with Zoom communion on 25 March 2020, the Annunciation, little expecting it to develop into an online sacramental community embracing five denominations over four continents, still going after nearly two years.

As the pandemic grew, Archbishops' letters withdrew the chalice, then public worship, and even forbade live-streaming from them. The Revd Dr Julie Gittoes movingly described her "eucharistic fast" in solidarity with lay people (Comment, 17 April 2020), while the Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, then Bishop of Chelmsford, advocated spiritual communion, and bishops permitted priests to celebrate communion alone, flouting Anglican tradition since the Book of Common Prayer.

With no end in sight, guidance issued for Holy Week and Easter 2020 included all three suggestions, but emphasised: "Participants in a streamed service of Holy Communion should not be encouraged to place bread and wine before their screens. . . Any idea of the 'remote consecration' of the bread and wine should be avoided."

The Bishop of Lichfield, Dr Michael Ipgrave, who was involved in drafting the guidance, chaired a theological working group, to which I submitted an essay, considering all options: first, in the material world, from fasting and "spiritual communion" through solo and concelebrated online communions, via indiscriminate lay presidency (not even Sydney diocese allows that!), drive-in churches, and drive-through

"McEucharists", to "extended communion", taking consecrated elements to those locked down — but, in such "contagious times" (BCP), none allow a valid and effective eucharistic celebration.

SO, I decided "to boldly go" into cyberspace, exploring church internet use during the 2000s, voyaging on the Ship of Fools website to online churches, and joining the Anglican Cathedral on Second Life, using avatars. Recent technological development provides two options: broadcast services (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube), and narrow-cast webinars (using software such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams).

Assessing these must consider concepts of the Church, sacramental understandings of ordination and eucharist, priestly intention, the nature of bread and wine, and the Real Presence.

More Evangelical or lower-church congregations, following Zwingli, emphasise Christ's command to "remember me", and thus can invite

Many prefer to worship at home in a blended live-stream

people to do so before their screens. Others prefer to "allow God to do what God wills", as Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711) says: "I believe Thy Body and Blood to be as really present in the Holy Sacrament as Thy divine power can make it, although the manner of Thy mysterious presence I cannot comprehend."

The more Catholic require priestly intention to change bread and wine into the Real Presence. Yet this does not need physical touch: at cathedral eucharists and ordinations, eucharistic ministers around the altar hold up patens and chalices at appropriate moments, further extended at Walsingham pilgrimages, Greenbelt communions for 20,000, or even more in papal masses.

Zoom communion uses an authorised liturgy, with sermon,

prayer, praise, and confession, culminating in bread and wine seen in windows. We pray that bread and wine "on this table and on our screens" may "be to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ", and the president extends hands in the *epiclesis* over bread and wine closely visible and the people gathered. Unlike a YouTube broadcast's indiscriminate eating alone, the president communicates each person by name, holding up bread or wafer, and we all drink from our cups together as one body.

THE Bishops' guidance, reissued frequently, recognises that "whilst this practice may have spiritual value for some, participants should not be encouraged to believe that any bread and wine brought before screens during online Holy Communion has been 'remotely consecrated,'" but the guidance "commends the questions raised by this practice for further theological reflection".

I participated in a study day for the College of Bishops in October 2020, leading to various proposals, and in a similar online "Table in the Wilderness" for Episcopal bishops in the United States. And yet "theological reflection" has not produced any new guidance or recommendations on either side of the Atlantic.

While we are grateful for communion in churches again, it is in one kind only, and with such restrictions that many prefer to worship at home in a blended live-stream. Omicron's rapid spread, and the prospect of variants up to the apocryphal Omega, means no quick return to former ways. Meanwhile, despite the official instructions against this practice, hundreds of churches and thousands of Anglicans find spiritual comfort and sacramental sustenance through online experiments. How do we hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches? How much longer must "hungry sheep look up" — but be not fed? Canon Professor Richard A. Burridge is a former Dean of King's College, London, a biblical scholar, author, speaker, and social commentator.

His latest book, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times*, is published by Wipf & Stock at £25 (CT Bookshop £22.50); 978-1-725-28577-4.