

Make Synods more synodical !

The Election to General Synod is due next year (and to Diocesan Synods too). Deanery Synod members are the electors. They need to know for whom they are voting and why.

In the past lack of information has been a major problem. Voters don't know what the issues are; and don't know the candidates. Few voters understand the voting system. So there are two important challenges.

CHALLENGE ONE:

Get savvy about STV

Elections to General Synod are not 'First Past the Post'. The Single Transferable Vote system has been used from the start of Synodical Government in 1970. The number of candidates to be elected is in proportion to the number of Electors. This ensures that there is a spread of views among the successful candidates, and that the votes of Electors are not wasted if they do not vote for the most popular candidate(s).

To work this system properly electors need enough information to be able to think through their preferences. Otherwise it is all too easy to vote for just one candidate (effectively reducing the election to 'first past the post') or to be persuaded to accept the 'slate' of candidates proposed by one of the main party groupings.

CHALLENGE TWO:

Get to know your candidates

Candidates prepare an election address which is sent out by the Diocese to every elector. Separate 'husting' meetings for clergy and lay electors have been usually held, maybe in each archdeaconry, but in practice attended by more candidates than electors.

In order to ensure a level playing field, synodical channels are not allowed to be used to inform electors of the key issues facing the Church in the next five years. Those candidates who may have the funds to do

so [their own or that of an interested group] can further lobby electors.

The Church Representation Rules Revision Committee “encourages dioceses, by guidance, to recognise that, in the light of technological advances, there are other means than the traditional hustings meeting to allow candidates to engage with the electorate and to be creative in their use of the range of alternatives to such meetings.” [GS 1902-5Y para.98 – June 2014]

In 2010 two Dioceses used their diocesan website to give opportunities to all candidates, lay and clergy, to state their views, and for electors to question them.

Gloucester diocese established a 'blog' on its website, on which electors could ask candidates questions, so that their answers were out in the open for all to read, and to question further.

After taking legal advice, Bristol filmed each candidate for three minutes. Every candidate took up the opportunity. There are two weeks between the closing date for nominations and ballot papers being sent out - enough time for the filmed interviews to be done, and to be put on-line before electors receive their papers. Bristol also filmed the 'hustings' without an audience, at which questions submitted by electors were put to the candidates by an independent chair; those were then available on the diocesan website.

An Oxford deanery is asking the diocese to do something similar in 2015. How about asking your diocese to follow Bristol's example?

A cautionary tale!

Do you remember the last time you elected your PCC? Not your Church Council! When the new Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in 2012 were elected, on average across the country only 15% voted. People apparently didn't know what the election was about, and they didn't know the candidates or why they might be fit for the job. Don't let that happen in next year's General Synod election!