

SYNOD ADOPTS A NEW PROCESS FOR ELECTING DIOCESAN BISHOP



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Photo: Mr Greg Mills, Chairperson of the Episcopal Elections Review Committee.

The most important decision a synod makes is to select its next bishop. The 2016 Synod revised the process by which future diocesan bishops will be elected. It decided to retain the capacity to elect the bishop while expanding the role of an election committee to vet and nominate candidates for consideration.

This decision followed a period of extensive consultation undertaken by the **Episcopal Elections Review Committee**, chaired by Mr Greg Mills. The Committee undertook a root and branch review of the entire electoral process.

‘It was great that the synod came to an emphatic decision,’ said Mr Mills. ‘After taking this step forward, the Committee will do further consultation so that the Synod can resolve a range of important secondary issues in 2017.’

Electing a diocesan bishop is a significant event in the life of any Anglican diocese because of the way oversight and governance occurs. The Anglican Church uses a Westminster styled system of leadership. Executive power is invested in the bishop who sits in and is accountable to the synod, which functions as a representative parliament.

This approach differs from congregational churches where local ministers make all the decisions while many newer denominations are governed by committees, whose membership turns over regularly. It also differs from older denominations where bishops can still function as virtual princes.

The Anglican model of being episcopally led and synodically governed makes the role of finding a new bishop particularly challenging.

The bishop is the principal teacher and pastor of a diocese but also the person to whom clergy are accountable. This makes their personal qualities for leadership a vital consideration. At the same time, they are also the captain of a diverse team committed to mission and ministry. This means their theological capacity to encourage a wide range of people is important. Finally, bishops are expected to be wise stewards because they oversee and have to overcome significant challenges that confront large multi-million dollar enterprises with hundreds of workers and thousands of members.

The system used to elect bishops in the diocese of Canberra and Goulburn had changed little since the 1930s. Although it had delivered good outcomes, many felt it was inadequate to contemporary demands and expectations and needed updating.

Vetting standards have risen markedly as the church has given more weight to safe ministry practice. Government requirements for financial accountability had also risen substantially. The use of videos and streaming mean that many people now have a higher expectation to hear from the candidates directly.

Many synod members considered the old system adequate but stressful, bruising and inconsistent. As synod members would nominate people on the floor, the capacity to check a person's references is always limited. Furthermore, it was often impossible for a candidate to answer all the questions that would arise. A candidate's success often hinged on their nominator's capacity to sway synod opinion.

The **Committee developed blog** which enabled people in the diocese to learn more about the options and their respective merits. Combined with regional meetings, this consultation process helped many synod members to not merely understand the issues but to reach for a solution.

The synod rejected a proposal that would see a select committee elect the bishop. It decided to retain the authority to elect because many valued both its transparency and the capacity to have congregations share in the decision making process. At the same time, members wished to avoid bias and conflict that can emerge when group compete to control a committee, which can leave others feeling locked out.

The process adopted would see a committee vet, evaluate and nominate the names of all candidates who meet a set of agreed selection criteria. In this way, the committee would assess all candidates and present their nomination to synod in an even handed way.

Having identified what process was preferred, the Committee will now begin to address the mechanics or how the new process might work in practice.

Prior to developing any ordinance, a range second order matters need to be resolved. These include clarifying: when the selection process should begin; how should any selection documentation be developed; how the nominating committee should be constituted, how synod members should be informed about viable candidates and what voting method should be adopted.

'We could proceed with drafting an ordinance now,' said Mr Mills, 'but we might end up having to amend it significantly on the day. We had lot of people participate in the debate and that was good and healthy. It showed that we can have robust discussions and come to a common mind. So we expect to have further consultations to clarify these second order issues so that the legal committee can develop a new ordinance for consideration in 2017.'