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LONG DISTANCE

REIMAGINING CHURCH MEETINGS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

PHOTO: ALICE PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK

With the COVID-19 pandemic putting a halt to in-person gatherings, the Anglican Church of Canada—like almost every organization—has had to reimagine itself through new technologies. Church services, meetings and other events have moved online, onto livestreaming and videoconferencing platforms.

On June 13, Council of General Synod (CoGS), the executive body of General Synod, held its first online meeting using Zoom videoconferencing. At that meeting, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada Archbishop Linda Nicholls told CoGS all travel for church leaders would be suspended until at least 2021. The House of Bishops has continued regular meetings using Zoom, and staff of the church's national office have been working remotely since March.

So what do the church's leaders say about the effects of these changes? Have they been a boon, or do they have a dark side? And once Canadians' ability to gather in person is reinstated, will church governance ever look the same?

Flights grounded

In a June 13 [presentation](#) to CoGS, Archdeacon Michael Thompson, general secretary of General Synod, said that despite income losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic,

the Anglican Church of Canada has been able to avoid cutting work hours for its staff through a combination of reduced costs—especially from travel, meetings and *Anglican Journal* distribution—and continuing support from the dioceses. (The church also qualified for two periods of the federal government's Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, but did not see its income fall enough for it to qualify for a third.)

Thompson characterized the savings from suspension of travel and face-to-face meetings in 2020 as "substantial."

At a time when budgets are tight and travel is restricted, many organizations are questioning the utility of business travel. Air Canada expects business travel to pick up after the summer months, according to the *Globe and Mail*, noting an increase in demand for domestic travel despite interprovincial travel bans and mandatory 14-day quarantines upon arrival—though a return to 2019 passenger levels is three years away, according to the company's finance chief. However, a June 15 [article](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* reported that some corporations were considering never reinstating the business travel forfeited during the coronavirus pandemic.

For secular organizations, business travel becomes a convenient-to-strike line item when income drops. "It's a

lot more palatable to say you're going to cut 30% of your travel, versus lay off more people," Sloan Dean, chief executive of Remington Hotels, told the newspaper.

But cutting flights means big savings for churches too. One of the "unexpected gifts" of COVID-19, Nicholls says, is the reduced expense it has meant for the church in cancelled travel.

Being forced to work and meet remotely is making the church reconsider what travel is necessary, she says.

"It's certainly making us say, 'Okay, we've just assumed we need to meet in person, we like meeting in person.' But if we don't meet in person, we also lose something. So we need to figure out, what is the balance?"

Nicholls says there are already conversations about continuing this year's suspension of travel into 2021. "No decision has been made on that, because it will depend what the rules are around the pandemic. Every epidemiologist talks about there being a second, possibly even a third wave of the pandemic, and in those times, things would be shut down again. And so, every meeting is going to be sort of planned tentatively."

With that in mind, church bodies are adjusting the ways that they meet—switching from long, in-person meetings to shorter, more frequent online ones, for instance. CoGS will be replacing its biannual three- to four-day meetings with single-day Zoom meetings every six weeks, Nicholls says. "That means that we can ... deal with issues that come up on a consistent basis throughout the year, which is different than [what] we have [done] in the past. And I think that's not a bad thing."

Nicholls says ceasing travel has meant a drastic reimagining of what her ministry looks like day to day.

"The first couple weeks were a bit like, 'Oh my goodness—what does the primate do when the primate

can't travel?'" she says. One of the first things she did, she says, was send out a message—first to bishops, then to parishes and dioceses—letting the church know she was available to attend online events.

Nicholls says she has remotely attended several confirmation classes, pre-recorded video sermons for parishes to include in their worship services, joined in on Zoom coffee hours, given the convocation address at the Montreal Diocesan College's online graduation ceremony, attended a youth graduation celebration in the diocese of New Westminster, given a blessing for the online National Indigenous Day of Prayer service, prerecorded a joint Anglican-Lutheran prayer service for Pentecost and been a guest on a podcast.

"It's allowing me to be in a lot more places than I could have been in person," Nicholls says. She even realized that because of time zones, she could attend more than one church in different parts of Canada on the same Sunday. "I was in Toronto in the morning and I was in the diocese of Caledonia in the afternoon."

While there have been downsides—recently, Nicholls was not able to participate in the consecration of Shane Parker, new bishop for the diocese of Ottawa—these do represent "ways that the primate would not normally have connected," she says.

"When I signed up to be a priest, I never thought I'd be doing videos in my living room," she says with a laugh.

"I've heard clergy who say that meeting on Zoom actually allows the congregation to get to know them in a different way than they do when they're standing up at the front of the church. And I think that's also a wonderful thing, that there are differences that are positive. And then we do lose something, and we have to ask how critical is that loss, and how can we make it work for us."



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‘Spaces of hospitality’

CoGS’ planning and agenda team has been navigating these pros and cons as it switches to online meetings.

“I would say that we’ve started [the transition]. We need to figure out some more solutions,” says co-chair the Rev. Monique Stone.

“When CoGS gets together, there’s a lot of small-group work and a lot of opportunity for people across the country to connect with each other and share the experience of the larger church, the national church, and learn from each other. So we need to figure out, how do we enable those things to happen online?” The relationship-building that comes from meeting around a table or sharing meals together is difficult to foster online, she says.

Another question the team is working through is how to translate the consensus model used at meetings of CoGS into a format that works on a videoconferencing platform. At in-person meetings, CoGS members show their level of satisfaction with a motion by holding up a red, yellow or green card. While Zoom offers the ability to poll attendees, it may not offer the same nuance, and is difficult to use for those joining the meeting by phone.

“The primate, and planning and agenda [team], are pretty committed to having discussion and consensus,

and that it’s a specific model of consensus in our space,” says Stone. “But how do we make that happen?... Do we maybe need to figure out how we could incorporate some ‘low tech’ in the midst of having a high-tech meeting?”

Stone says evaluations were distributed to CoGS members in order to hear feedback on what might be improved and new ideas for moving the meetings online.

Of course, it’s not only churches that are moving to online platforms—organizations everywhere have had to. In the months since the pandemic began, there have been reports of “Zoom fatigue” or “Zoom burnout,” with experts claiming that video calls are more exhausting than in-person meetings. The *New York Times* has also reported that some workplace inequities that show up at in-person meetings, like the tendency for women to be ignored or speak less often, are amplified in online meetings.

For Stone, choosing a platform is a question of accessibility. “In my own parish, not only did we turn to doing church online, we did not use Zoom as a product, because we felt in our church context it wasn’t inclusive enough for our seniors. We used a product that allows us to have a phone number that seniors can phone into without a PIN or an ID.”

For CoGS, she said, Zoom seemed a better fit, though there are still potential barriers. “If you make the Zoom

meeting too technical and you start sharing your screen and showing PowerPoints, then is that a barrier to someone who either doesn't have a visual opportunity or has a problem figuring out what's on the screen and how you expand it or move it around." Internet speed, which affects one's ability to speak and hear clearly in Zoom meetings, is another potential accessibility problem, she notes.

While it's possible to call in to Zoom meetings via phone line, participants using the phone are shut out from the platform's visual features, like screen sharing, or seeing the reactions of other meeting attendees—and vice versa.

Nicholls says that in meetings of CoGS and the House of Bishops, it is typically members who live in rural or isolated areas with limited internet access that have to join by phone.

"We still have to figure out, what does this mean for people who are further away?" she says. "One of the things we've discovered is that it might mean, since we're not paying for travel ... that somebody who didn't have a computer at home, we might need to provide with a laptop or an iPad, for the time that they are a member of the council, so that they can make that access possible. So we're having to figure out new ways of doing things." (Travel to and accommodation at CoGS meetings for council members is paid for through the General Synod budget.)

Stone says there must be a balance between technology and the need to bring people physically together, once in-person meetings are possible again. "I think one of the real great aspects of in-person meetings for a group that works on behalf of the whole country is getting together and building relationship. At the same time, we might see technology used more often, and more successfully."

In the meantime, it's important to be cognizant of the effects of these technologies, Stone says.

"There's a lot of emerging information about how tiring online meetings are, because [meeting online] does impact you in different ways physiologically. With your eyes, with focus.... We don't get those little breaks

that maybe we can self-monitor on in an in-person meeting," says Stone.

It's also worth remembering the different abilities that church members have, she says. "I think we always need to remember, how is anything we're doing that uses a technology platform either inclusive or [causing] barriers? How can even our online spaces be places of hospitality to all that come to a meeting or come to a worship service?"

Nicholls says she's seen many churches, perhaps out of accessibility or privacy concerns, shift from live services over platforms like Zoom to posting pre-recorded services online. This allows the service to be watched any time, and archived. "That is one of the curiosities—whether it's prerecorded or whether it's live, clergy have reported more people online than they have in person," says Nicholls. "And I think that this is kind of a silver lining around evangelism. I mean, people who would never have dared to drive to a church or walk up to a church, go through the doors and sit in a service, can sit in the comfort of their own home and click online and watch the service and have an opportunity to hear.

"Now that puts a burden on us that what they hear is well done and appropriate and reaches out. But I think it's an avenue for sharing the good news of the gospel in ways that we have been slow and resistant to," she says. "COVID-19 has dragged us into the 21st century."

Any technology has a dark side, Nicholls says.

"We could get so consumed with the technology that we forget its purpose is to help us to worship, to help us to build community. And I don't think it will ever replace being present with one another when we're able to."

At the same time, digital communication seems likely to help the church reach people. During the pandemic and even afterwards, Nicholls says, it "may provide us with another tool to be able to help us be who we want to be as God's people—to connect with ... people who can't travel physical distances and who can't be physically present.

"We just have to learn to use this well and to learn the skills and then say, 'When should we use it?' And that's going to be the big question as we go forward." ■