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To: the Archbishop of York [*email address removed*]  
cc: the Secretary General [*email address removed*]

15 November 2023

Dear Archbishop Stephen,

### **Suggestions for House of Bishops' Standing Committee discussion on transparency.**

I was in the public gallery of General Synod today when you said that, as Chair of the House of Bishops' Standing Committee you would, in consultation with others, reflect upon the calls from some in General Synod for greater transparency in the practises of the House of Bishops.

I am writing to you from my experience of this topic in case it assists.

From 2000 – 2007 I was Executive Officer in the Central Secretariat working in the House of Bishops' department (for Jonathan Neil-Smith) and was the main minute-taker at House of Bishops meetings. I was subsequently a member of General Synod from 2010 – 2015.

### **Is confidentiality really needed?**

Bishops tend to presume the need for confidentiality in their meetings. When this is challenged the answer often given is that bishops need to be able to speak freely when discussing sensitive topics.

I think that presumption needs to be challenged. My experience is that the House of Bishops meetings had an agenda that was largely a pre-view of what was to come up at General Synod. I would sit in the House of Bishops' meeting and listen to a bishop make a speech of their view on a topic. Then a couple of weeks later the same bishop would make exactly the same speech in General Synod. The bishop had not needed the Bishops' meeting to be confidential because they were quite happy to say the same thing at General Synod.

The real value / purpose of the bishops meeting in private was that meeting together residentially in a hotel and discussing topics had a team-building, friendship, collegiality value.

If it is decided that House of Bishops meetings should remain private, then the reason given should be the value of developing collegiality, not a claim for the need for confidentiality.

## **Minutes**

We wrote full minutes of meetings. They were written in the style of naming only the bishop who introduced the topic, and then writing “during the discussion the following points were made...” and giving a series of bullet points where each bishop who spoke had their point summarised, but not naming the individual bishop. This had two benefits. It avoided the bishop coming back asking us to tweak the wording of their statement, as they were not named. The other was that if the minutes ever got into the wrong hands, such as the Press, it would not matter because who said what was not listed, it only set out the arguments.

The result was detailed minutes that were helpful in setting out the debate and the action points. If those minutes had ever been leaked to the Press they would not actually have had much to write about.

It was therefore over-kill for those minutes to be marked “Strictly Confidential” i.e. for bishops’ eyes only, and a separate document was produced of Summary of Decisions that was so short and bland it gave no real information and was usually not worth reading.

I do not know if the same type of minutes are taken today. If they are, I would suggest that these fuller minutes are made available as part of the General Synod papers, and the Summary of Decisions document to be dispensed with.

If the Bishops wanted to go the whole hog of full transparency, a stenographer could be employed and transcripts produced.

## **Meetings without staff**

During my time working for the House of Bishops there was a period for a couple of years where for a particular sensitive topic the bishops got into a habit of going into a ‘private session’ where they would discuss a topic without any staff present. Although the bishops liked this, it was disastrous from an operational perspective and was later abandoned. As staff we would be asked by a bishop what progress we had made on a topic since the last meeting, and when we said we didn’t know what they were talking about, the bishop would realise that they had made a decision in their private meeting without staff and then no-one had told the staff what the action point was, so no work had been done.

I am out of touch with recent practice, but I understand that during Covid and possibly beyond that Bishops had multiple meetings on Zoom that were not properly minuted. I expect that they will have been valued by the Bishops at the time for the sense of collegiality it gave, but will have suffered from the same problems of not having proper records of decisions and consequently making it difficult to implement actions.

## **Standing Orders and public participation**

The House of Bishops have made some tiny steps to allowing others to attend. For example prior to the ordination of women bishops they invited some senior women clergy to attend their meetings. I think that as part of the Living in Love and Faith process some representatives of the LGBTQ+ community have also been invited on occasion. However, whilst well intentioned this only breeds resentment. ‘Why are these specially selected people allowed to attend and not me?’ ‘They might be specially influencing the bishops when I can’t’

is the natural reaction to such actions. The meetings need to be either open to the public - e.g. with public seating, or with video recording or transcripts - or not at all, rather than special access to a favoured few.

When I was on General Synod, I pointed out that the Standing Orders were being misused in the practise of the House of Bishops, in that the Standing Orders presumed that House of Bishops meetings should be available for the public to attend, and only to meet in private in the exceptional circumstances where this was necessary. Whereas this is not how the House of Bishops operate.

In my speech<sup>1</sup> in the February 2012 General Synod I made that point in a rather cheeky way:

“House of Bishops Standing Order 13 says,

“The public shall be admitted to all sittings of the House within the limits of such seating capacity as may be allocated...”

Now, in this age of austerity, there appears to have been a severe shortage of chairs at House of Bishops’ meetings!

What happens, as Bishop Peter said, is that at the start of every meeting the House of Bishops vote to have the entire meeting in private session under Standing Order 14. Then, if there’s something really confidential they then move to a private, private, session, without staff.

What we need is for the House of Bishops to move to the way of working envisaged in its own Standing Orders: to allow the public to observe their meetings; and only when there is something genuinely very confidential, for them to move into a private session.

Once people see the House of Bishops in operation, they will see how boring most of the meetings are – and as a former House of Bishops’ minute taker for seven years I can vouch for that! – and this will dispel any suspicion that bishops meet in smoke-filled rooms doing secret dodgy deals.”

I hope that these reflections are helpful to your considerations.

Yours sincerely,

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Adrian Vincent

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<sup>1</sup> <https://adrianvincent.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/201202-Report-on-the-February-2012-General-Synod.pdf>