

The role of the Crown Nominations Commission, and a comparative method of appointing Diocesan Bishops.

David Baldwin Wycombe Deanery Number 171

This motion has been put forward by a PCC in High Wycombe, as a result of the failure to appoint a new Bishop of Oxford, and a process that appears no longer fit for purpose. I'd like to detail the situation as it existed two years ago, and simply say that Oxford and Växjö are different in their geographic size, but it is the process that we are illustrating here today.

In the spring of 2014 both Bishop John Pritchard of Oxford and Bishop Jan-Olof Johansson of Växjö announced their impending retirement. What happened next has revealed an interesting contrast between the processes of the Church of Sweden and those of the Church of England in making episcopal appointments. In the Church of Sweden a vacancy in the house of Bishops is filled by election, following an open and transparent process. In the Church of England the process for choosing a diocesan bishop begins in the diocese. However, as the diocesan website points out, "because of the variety of roles which diocesan bishops have, not only within the Church of England but also in the local community and the nation at large, the choice is not made by representatives of the diocese alone. Diocesan representatives work with representatives of the wider Church of England, under the presidency of the Archbishops."

It continues: "The Vacancy in See Committee... has put together a description of the Diocese and its thoughts on the qualities needed in the next Bishop of Oxford. As part of the broader consultation... the Appointments Secretaries for the Archbishops and for the Prime Minister spent two days in the Diocese... meeting a wide range of groups both church and non-church based, to gather their views..."

Following this, the process is entrusted to the Crown Nominations Commission (CNC), which consists of the two Archbishops, six representatives from the diocese, and six from General Synod. Its proceedings (like those of the diocese's Vacancy in See Committee) are confidential. Initially it was expected that a nomination would be forwarded to the Queen in the spring of 2015 and that the person nominated would be consecrated/transferred toward the end of this year. However, when the CNC met in May the meeting concluded without an agreed nomination. This meant that the See of Oxford would not be considered again until early 2016, when the same process begins again. Because of the number of other vacant Sees, the earliest we can expect a new Bishop of Oxford is at the end of 2016. Questions arise about the speed of the appointment process, the lack of local responsibility for the appointment, the lack of transparency of the process, and indeed the appointment of the members of the CNC in this particular situation where no agreed nomination was made first time around, and a new General Synod was elected.

This contrasts with the clarity and speed of the time-table for the episcopal election in Växjö:

- The choice of the Electoral College (whose members have the right to nominate candidates and to vote in the nomination ballot and the actual election was completed by 28th May 2014. The college consists of all priests and deacons in the diocese, an equal number of electors (lay people) chosen by the parishes of the diocese, the ordinary members of the diocesan board and cathedral chapter, roughly 700 people in total.
- The Nomination vote to designate the six candidates for Bishop was held on 27th September, 2014, and the "hearing" where the candidates were questioned by electors was held on 25th October 2014.
- The first round of the election took place on 4th November, 2014 in the eight deaneries of the diocese and at the diocesan office. No candidate obtained more than 50 per cent of the votes, so a second round of voting took place on 3rd December, 2014. This was a straight choice between the two candidates who won the most votes in the first round. Fredrik Modéus obtained a clear majority of votes cast and was duly elected.

Bishop Jan-Olof Johansson laid down his pastoral staff on Monday 6th April 2015, and Fredrik Modéus was consecrated as Bishop on Sunday, 12th April, in Uppsala cathedral. He was welcomed into his diocese the following Sunday (19th April).

In comparison, the Crown Nominations Commission did not interview candidates until nearly a month after the entire Swedish process had been completed (and six months after Bishop John had resigned). Even then it failed to nominate a successor. Our partner diocese had a vacancy of less than one week. The vacancy in this diocese is likely to last at least two years. In view of this, the Wycombe Deanery Synod is putting forward to Diocesan Synod today the following motion, and I would like to propose:

"That this Synod invite the Archbishops to initiate a review into the role of the Crown Nominations Commission, including consideration of alternative methods of appointment for diocesan bishops"