

Where are the Youth? A Response to Inclusion and Diversity in Decision-Making

By Hannah Wygiera

How many times have you heard, or been guilty of saying, “The youth are the future of the Church”? On the surface, this seems like a nice, hopeful statement. It implies the involvement of youth only when they come into adulthood. It suggests a promised future of the Church. However, when I was a youth delegate, this was the most discouraging statement. It completely erases the present-day involvement of young people in the Anglican Church. It ignores the presence of youth today and implies that they only have value in the future.

One complication is over the confusion of who is a youth. Youth ministry is often grouped into children’s ministry work and defines youth as teenagers under 18. Most denominations follow this definition, including the Anglican Church of Canada in the specific context of ministry. However, in Church governance, youth are defined as ages 16-25. As a youth delegate at age 24, I did not feel I fit the idea of youth. I had been married for a few years and was in a PhD program. My life experiences were already vastly different from the younger delegates who were still in high school. This confusion was also evident on the floor of General Synod as the two definitions of youth, ministry and governance, were often combined, especially in discussions of declining numbers.

When I served as a youth delegate at General Synod 2023, it became increasingly clear that I was a checkmark in a list of inclusions. There was a lot of talk about the youth and what the youth wanted. Yet we were never asked. On the floor of General Synod, I heard statements such as, “This resolution is important to the youth,” “The youth want to go this direction,” and “We should be focusing on allowing younger people in leadership roles.” At surface level, that sounded great. However, such statements were followed by complaints over shrinking numbers of young people in parishes and an overall lack of youth involvement. All the focus was on the empty pews. No one talked about the youth, however few, who were *in* the pews. Nobody asked me, as a youth delegate, my opinion of these statistics. I left General Synod thinking of the irony of having a youth delegate for a week only to ignore them in daily parish life.

The Pathway of Diversity and Inclusion has a similar feeling to saying “The youth are the future of the Church.” It means well but is ultimately empty words. It talks about creating new committees to solve problems that already have solutions presented from marginalized groups. The membership of the Primate’s Commission failed to include a diverse membership, yet prioritized producing hypotheses that addressed diversity.¹ Yes, there are problems, but unless the Church is willing to actually listen to the identified groups, these pathways are token actions.

1 Sean Frankling, “Northern bishops speak out against primate’s commission,” *Anglican Journal*, September 18, 2024, <https://anglicanjournal.com/northern-bishops-speak-out-against-primates-commission/>.

The lamentations over diminishing numbers of young people completely ignore those who are present. Instead of feeling hopeless, this is an opportunity to look at the mission of the Church. There are plenty of examples of youth involvement across the Anglican Communion. At the Lambeth Conference in 2022, youth were invited as stewards to help run the conference and meet together.² The Church of England recently gave approval in February 2025 for a group of young voices to be more a part of decision-making processes.³ Alongside Hope has a youth council that learns about and advocates for partner organizations.⁴ Youth are actively pursuing the mission of the Church. It is time to consider their voices and learn from them.

Consider these questions and my thoughts as you think about youth and the proposed Pathway:

1. Who regulates the membership of committees to be diverse and representative of the Anglican Church of Canada today?

As demonstrated with the Primate's Commission and Hypotheses, diverse representation is not always a priority. Yes, representation for the Council of the North, the Province of the Northern Lights, and ACIP was achieved after it was pointed out, but where were the youth? If they are the so-called future of the Church, they should be the ones at the centre of discussions about the future of the Church. However, how is diversity included in membership without making marginalized groups feel like a checkmark? I have called myself the token youth delegate many times. I do not mind filling that space but if I am not included in discussions or processes, then I am nothing more than a diversity seat-filler.

2. Why are youth not included when creating committee membership?

Take a look at all the committees that come from General Synod. The membership is primarily people over thirty, and likely older than that. Yet, most youth were not asked or nominated for committees. It was not until I called out the Council of General Synod for ignoring youth outside of General Synod that suddenly I was asked to be part of the General Synod Planning Committee.⁵ It felt like we were not taken seriously as delegates of General Synod after the concluding Eucharist. General Synod knows youth are present. So why are they continuously ignored?

2 "Steward Role Profile," *Lambeth Conference*, https://llandaff.contentfiles.net/media/documents/LC2022_steward_role_profile_1.pdf.

3 The Church of England, "Business Done 13 February (Morning)," General Synod February 2025, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/business-done-13-february-2025-morning.pdf>.

4 "Join the Youth Movement," *Alongside Hope*, <https://alongsidehope.org/get-involved/youth-movement/>.

5 Sean Frankling, "Voices of caution raised at CoGS discussion of church-changing 'hypotheses,'" *Anglican Journal*, November 11, 2024, <https://anglicanjournal.com/voices-of-caution-raised-at-cogs-discussion-of-church-changing-hypotheses/>.

3. **Does the Church actually care about different groups that represent diversity or are they just filling a presentation spot?**

The Anglican Church of Canada is a diverse Church. There are already many groups that represent diversity, such as the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples or Black Anglicans. While there is some inclusion in aspects of Synod such as the prayers, most of the time such groups just give a presentation. Are Church members just patting ourselves on the back for having these groups? If there was a youth council, would they actually be included or just given a presentation slot?

4. **Why do youth attend Anglican churches? Why do many attend churches of other denominations?**

Have you ever asked a youth member why they attend an Anglican church? When I was in my undergraduate degree at Dalhousie University, I spent a lot of time in the chapel at King's College next door. That little building was full for every service. At the beginning of the year, students would wander in, usually drawn in by the choir. Then they were pulled into the Anglo-Catholic traditions. By the end of the academic year, they were getting baptized. Their interests in history and philosophy that they were learning in their classes were included in the campus chapel. That little chapel met students where they were at. In contrast, I have a friend who is a pastor at a large church in our city. On a slow day, the young adults group can get around 30 participants. While my parish is lucky to have two young members on a Sunday, I know that young Christians throughout the city are going to church. It does not matter to me what pews they are in, as long as they are in pews. How can the Anglican Church support other churches where there are young people?

5. **Does dismantlement bring productive change? Or does it risk destroying our foundation?**

Is this change for change's sake? Or is there a purpose to it? Yes, some of the structures of General Synod need to be reconsidered. I was unable to attend the last Council of General Synod meeting due to illness so I asked if I could Zoom in. I was told they did not have the technology to do that. This surprised me. It does not require a canonical change to buy a \$200 microphone and camera and allow participants to be part of the meeting. My professors at the university do it all the time. Most youth delegates are unable to attend Council of General Synod meetings because of school commitments. This could be an easy solution. The Anglican Church is setting up its own barriers for easy changes in accessibility while focusing on completely changing the foundations of our episcopal structure. The episcopal structure is not and has never been the problem. The problem is the Church's inability to make simple, but impactful changes that have been suggested for decades. Does General Synod need to be dismantled and restructured? Or does General Synod need finally to listen?

I leave you with this example of why youth need to be included in the Church. At the end of General Synod 2023, the youth were asked to lead the prayers at the closing Eucharist. Having seen the specific understanding of youth that was presented that week, I asked the other youth delegates if they wanted to do something a little different and surprising. It was a simple idea: use prayers from the Book of Common Prayer. Yet, it was something that people would not expect because they had placed their own expectations of youth on us. The youngest delegate even said, "I love using the BCP!" We got up to the microphone and started reading the first prayer and I could see heads turn.

No one expected the youth to use the BCP! I am sure many thought we did not even know what the BCP was. There we were, the youngest delegates at General Synod, using prayers that had been used for centuries. In doing so, we made a statement: the youth have more to offer and understand what it means to be Anglican more than people realize.

Youth are not the future of the Church. They are the present. They are active members. Like the broader population of the Church, many youth members value the traditions and what makes us Anglican while advocating for productive changes that are rooted in Scripture. Historically, God has used young people to lead the Church. It is time to include them in discussions and planning. Maybe young Anglicans can be an example for engaging diversity and inclusion in decision-making. The Anglican Church of Canada does not need a committee to talk about how to include youth. Just bring them in, listen, and learn.

“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.” 1 Timothy 4:12 (NIV)



Hannah Wygiera is a PhD student at the University of Calgary, researching English religious and legal history. She lives in Red Deer, AB and is involved in various levels of governance work in the Anglican Church of Canada.