

Synod attendance

(A report from the Standing Committee.)

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Synod about the results of a survey of Synod members designed to identify the issues that hinder their attendance at Synod sessions and to make recommendations for action designed to increase that attendance.

Recommendations

2. The Synod receive this report.

3. The Synod consider the following motion to be moved at the forthcoming session of the Synod "by request of the Standing Committee" –

"Synod, noting the report on Synod attendance and the desirability of seeking ways to increase the attendance and participation of members at Synod sessions, agrees to trial the following arrangements for the 2nd ordinary session of the Synod in 2015 –

- (a) consistent with resolution 31/13, continue to hold the session over 5 appointed days but, pursuant to rule 1.1(2) of the business rules, commence meeting at the later time of 3.45pm on each appointed day,
- (b) schedule a shorter dinner break from 5.45 to 6.45pm on each appointed day (other than the first day),
- (c) schedule the conclusion of business at the earlier time of 9.00pm on each appointed day,
- (d) schedule all business involving the consideration of motions (other than formal and procedural motions, motions for the unopposed introduction of a proposed ordinance and motions for the reclassification of a provisional parish) after 4.30pm on each appointed day, and
- (e) keep to a minimum presentations and other business not involving the consideration of motions, including the Presidential Address and Missionary Hour, and, to the extent possible, schedule such business before 5.00pm on each appointed day,

and –

- (f) requests the Standing Committee to ensure, as far as possible, that the business it promotes to the Synod focuses on significant issues of policy and strategic direction and that it avoids promoting to the Synod technical or administrative business which can be dealt with by the Standing Committee under its delegated authority, and
- (g) requests members who are unable to attend and participate in any part of the 2nd ordinary session of the Synod in 2015 to consider, in the case of parochial ministers and parochial representatives, appointing an alternate for the session or, in the case of elected or appointed members, resigning their membership to enable the election or appointment of those who can."

Background

4. At its meeting on 11 November 2013 the Standing Committee received a report advising details of the attendance at the 3rd session of the 49th Synod in October 2013, and, noting that Synod attendance has averaged around 60% of Synod members for the last 5 years, requested SDS to –

- (a) survey Synod members to determine issues that hinder their attendance at Synod sessions, and
- (b) recommend appropriate actions that may be taken to increase attendance by members of Synod.

5. A short web-based survey was constructed and members of the 49th Synod were sent an email invitation with the appropriate access details in March 2014. The survey was completely anonymous and asked 4 simple questions which are set out in Appendix 1.

6. A summary of the responses received from the survey is set out in Appendix 2.

7. In addition to the survey of Synod members, each of the other 22 dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia were asked to indicate the attendance levels at their synods. The information provided by 16 dioceses is set out in Appendix 3.

Commentary on recommendations

8. A key metric from the survey is the fact that 66% of respondents (364 from 549) indicated there was nothing that could be done to increase their attendance at Synod. Accordingly care needs to be taken in making changes aimed at increasing Synod attendance, particularly significant changes, since such changes may prejudice the “silent majority” of members whose current attendance is assumed to already be at or close to a maximum. Put another way, there is a need to avoid making changes called for by the few which result in attendance levels declining for the many.

9. However the feedback from the survey points to some changes that might be made to improve overall levels of attendance at Synod.

Priority given to Synod

10. Although members are summoned to the Synod by the Archbishop under the 1902 Constitutions, there will always be a certain proportion of members who cannot attend Synod sessions for various reasons. Family commitments, illness and work commitments affect everybody and have the potential to impact a member’s attendance despite careful planning in advance. However the survey suggests in places that greater priority might be given by some members, particularly clergy, in attending Synod sessions in response to the Archbishop’s summons. For example, in the table in paragraph 8 of Annexure 2, 49% of responding rectors nominated “work commitments” as the main reason for not attending Synod, suggesting perhaps that attending Synod is not always regarded by rectors as a work commitment. In the same table, “absent from Sydney (work or holidays)” was nominated by 10% of rectors and “too far to travel” by 7% of rectors as the main reason for not attending. This compares to corresponding figures for parish lay representatives of 4% and 1% respectively.

11. In order to address the priority issue, it is proposed that the Synod encourage/remind members who cannot attend a session to consider, where possible, standing aside to allow for the election or appointment of others who can attend. While it may not be possible or appropriate for a person who cannot attend to resign as a member of the Synod, rectors and parish lay representatives may have the option of appointing an alternate to attend a particular session in their place under the provisions of Division 2 of Part 4 and Division 5 of Part 5 of the *Synod Membership Ordinance 1995*. Further information about how to appoint an alternate can be obtained from the Diocesan Registry.

12. There may be little more the Synod can meaningfully do in this area. The episcopal team undoubtedly has a role in encouraging rectors to give an appropriate level of priority to attending Synod and rectors can encourage the selection of parish representatives who are willing and able to attend.

Sitting times

13. The most commonly nominated way to improve levels of Synod attendance involved changes to its sitting times (see paragraph 14 in Appendix 2). In particular, a significant number of members suggested a later start for each sitting day, an earlier finish and, despite Synod’s decision last year to revert to a 5 day session of Synod, fewer sitting days. Other members suggested starting earlier each day or holding sessions on the weekend.

14. There are a couple of considerations that should be taken into account in responding to this feedback. The first consideration is the caution referred to in paragraph 8 above. The second is the need to maintain a sufficient number of sitting hours for the session to adequately deal with business.

15. Having regard to these matters, it is proposed that each sitting day of the Synod in 2015 start a bit later (3.45pm instead of 3.15pm), finish a bit earlier (9.00pm instead of 9.30pm) and involve slightly shorter dinner breaks (1 hour instead of 1 ¼ hours on days 2 to 5). If these changes were adopted over a standard 5 day session, the total sitting time would drop from 24 ¾ hours to 20 ¾ hours (ie a loss of 4 hours of sitting time).

16. A number of members nominated “fewer days” as a change that would increase their attendance. One variation to the proposal would therefore be to retain a 3.15pm start time over a 4 day session (with the same earlier finishing time and shorter dinner breaks). This would result in 18 ½ hours of total sitting time. This variation is likely to have some attraction for those who are giving up work time and/or travelling distance to get to Synod. However given the preference expressed by the Synod last year for 5 sitting days, this variation has not been pursued in this report.

Content and scheduling of business

17. A number of members nominated changes that could be made to the content and scheduling of Synod business as a means of improving their attendance (see paragraph 15 of Annexure 2). In responding to this feedback it is proposed that Synod affirm its expectation that the Standing Committee will promote business to Synod which focuses on significant issues of policy and strategic direction and

will avoid promoting to Synod technical or administrative business which can be dealt with by the Standing Committee under its delegated authorities.

18. It is also proposed that business involving the consideration of substantive motions be scheduled after 4.30pm and that presentations and other business which does not involve the consideration of motions (eg. Presidential address, Missionary Hour etc) be kept to a minimum and, to the extent possible, scheduled before 5.00pm.

Other matters

19. A number of members suggested that speakers at Synod only be granted extensions of time for speeches in exceptional circumstances, rather than as a matter of course. As the extension of a speaker's time is already a matter for the Synod to decide on a case-by-case basis, no proposal is made in this report about this matter. However it is helpful to be reminded that speakers know the time limits in advance and therefore for debates on notice it is reasonable to expect speakers to prepare speeches within those limits.

20. It is not proposed to pick up suggestions that the Synod meeting place be moved to the geographic centre of the Diocese (eg Parramatta) (see paragraph 16 of Appendix 20). This is largely because of the administrative challenges (and costs) in supporting the Synod at a distance from St Andrew's House. However to assist members travelling distance to attend Synod, affordable accommodation near the Synod venue is being explored. Any relevant information will be conveyed to members for the 2014 session.

21. Finally, while comments in relation to car parking have been noted (see paragraph 17 of Appendix 2), it is not proposed that any additional action be taken in relation to car parking. Each year discussions are held with the operator of the St Andrew's House Car Park to put in place arrangements to ensure that the rates offered by the operator are discounted to the extent possible and that members can exit the car park as soon as possible at the end of the evening. However the feedback received from members about car parking arrangements will be conveyed to the car park operator in discussions for the 2014 session.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee

ROBERT WICKS
Diocesan Secretary

26 June 2014

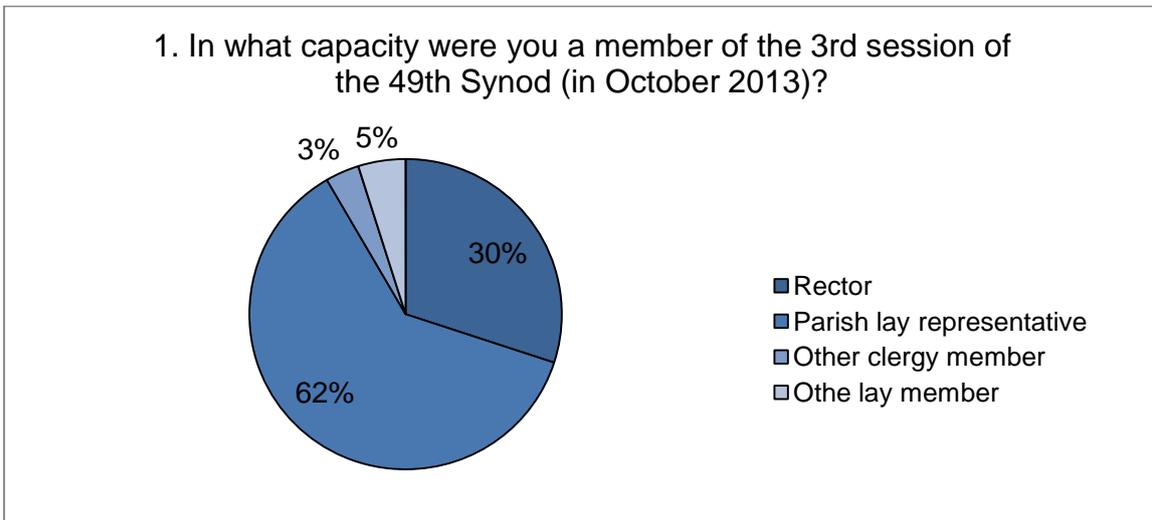
Survey questions

1	In what capacity were you a member of the 3 rd session of the 49 th Synod (in October 2013)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rector • Parish lay representative • Other clergy member • Other lay member
2	Which sittings of the last session of Synod in October 2013 did you attend?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monday 14 October – afternoon • Monday 14 October – evening • Tuesday 15 October – afternoon • Tuesday 15 October – evening • Wednesday 16 October – afternoon • Wednesday 16 October – evening
3	If you did not attend all sittings of the last session of Synod, what was your main reason for not attending?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work commitments • Family/carer commitments • Poor health • Absent from Sydney (work or holidays) • Too far to travel • Too difficult to participate • Business not relevant/interesting • Other
	Please elaborate on your main reason for not attending.	<i>[free text]</i>
4	Are there any changes which could be made to the Synod which would increase your attendance in the future?	Yes / No
	Please explain.	<i>[free text]</i>

Summary of responses from survey

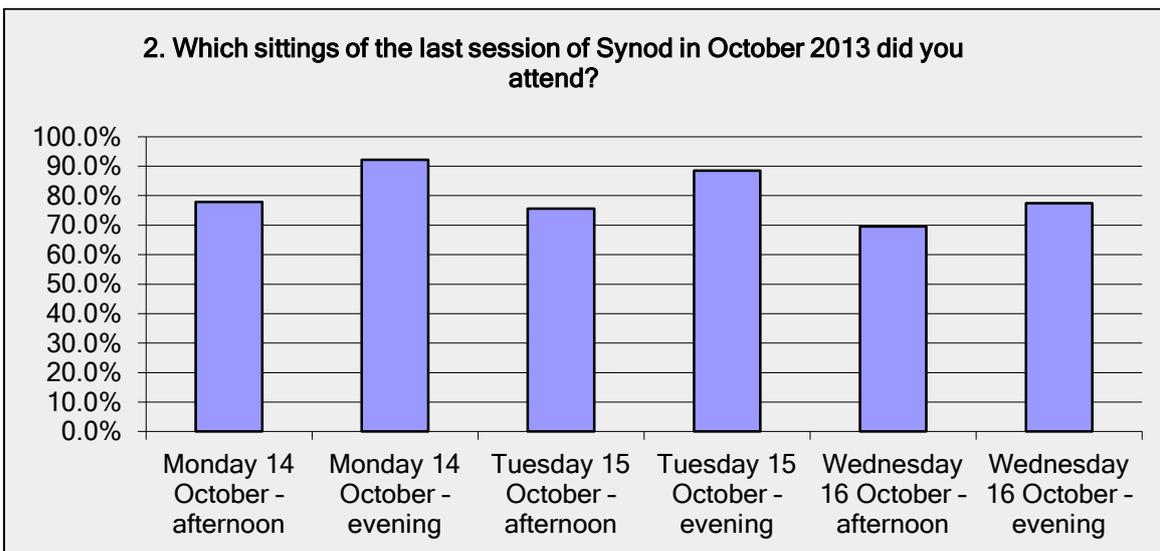
Question 1 - Membership

- 549 members (68% of the 805 members of the 3rd session of the 49th Synod) responded to the survey. The response rate was almost the same among clergy as for lay members.
- The proportion of total responses coming from each category of membership is shown in the following chart.



Question 2 - Attendance

- 512 members responded to question 2. These responses show attendance declined slightly over the 3 days, with evening sessions better attended than afternoons. With the count of actual attendance recorded during Synod ranging from 526 (Monday afternoon) and 522 (Tuesday evening) to 421 (Wednesday afternoon) it is likely that a large proportion of the 37 members who chose not to complete this question, and the further 256 who did not respond to the survey, did not attend the 2013 session of Synod.
- The pattern of attendance amongst the 512 members who responded to this question is shown in the graph below –

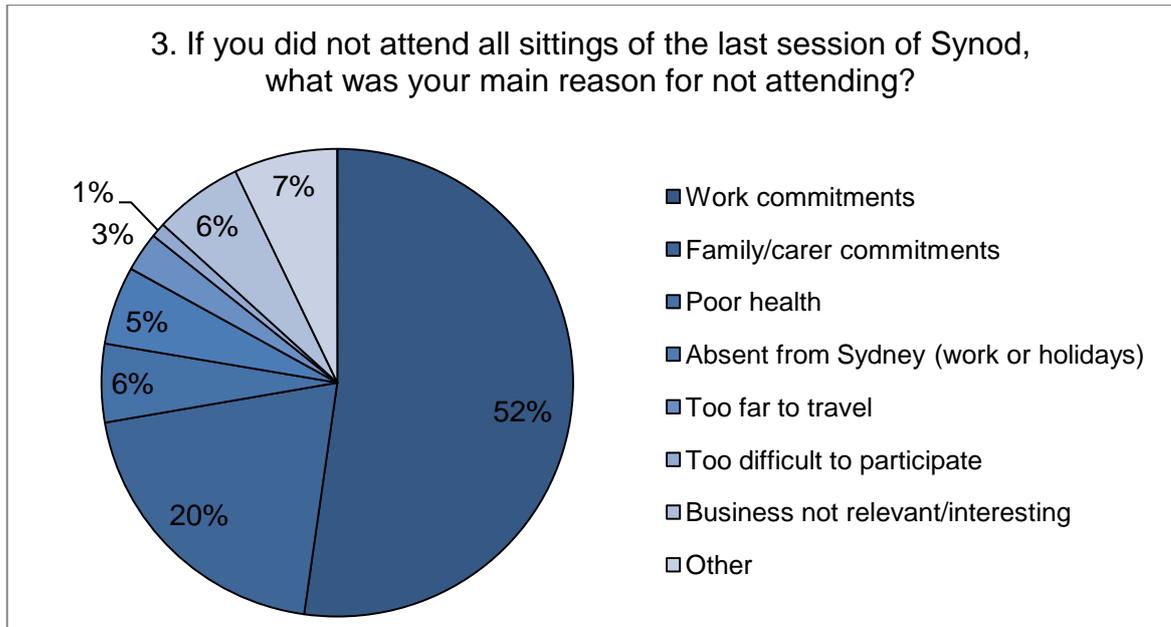


Question 3 - Reasons

5. "Work commitments" was the main reason given for not attending, followed by "Family/carer commitments". Together these 2 account for between two thirds and three quarters of the specific reasons given for non attendance.

6. Interestingly, only 295 respondents (54%) chose to answer this question at all. Presumably in most cases this was because the question asked "If you did not attend ... what was your main reason for not attending?" and so if the person attended all the sittings of the 2013 session of Synod they were not required to answer this question.

7. In summary, the reasons given for not attending are shown in the following chart –



8. The following table compares the main reasons given by rectors and parish lay representatives for not attending one or more particular sittings of the last Synod –

	Percentage of respondents for whom this is the main reason for not attending		
	Rectors (88)	Parish Lay Representatives (185)	Total
Work commitments	49%	54%	52%
Family/carer commitments	18%	20%	20%
Poor health	1%	6%	6%
Absent from Sydney (work or holidays)	10%	4%	5%
Too far to travel	7%	1%	3%
Too difficult to participate	0%	2%	1%
Business not relevant/interesting	8%	5%	6%
Other	7%	8%	7%

9. The main variations between rectors and parish lay representatives is that "Poor health" is more of an issue for parish lay representatives, with more rectors stating "Absent from Sydney" and "Too far to travel" as their main reasons for not attending.

10. In response to the invitation in this question to elaborate on your main reason for not attending, 151 people provided a further short explanation. Broadly speaking the range of these comments follows a

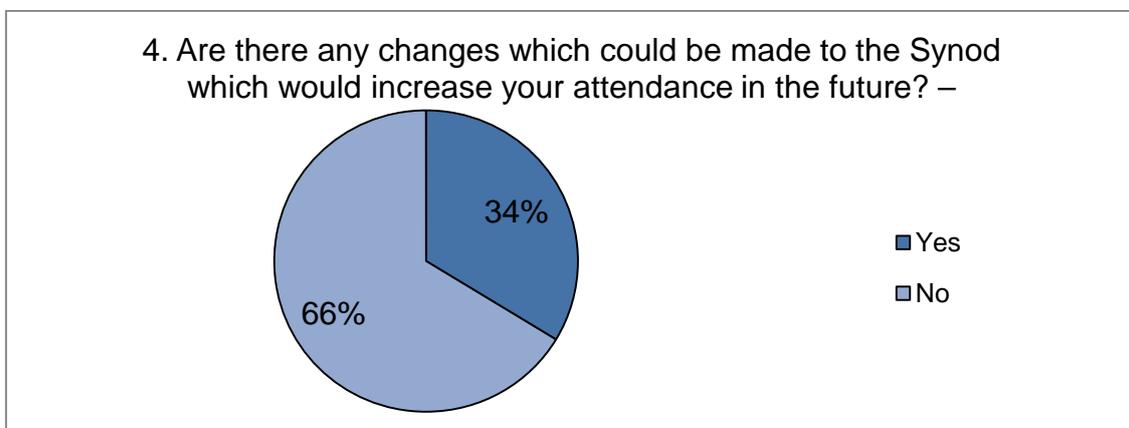
similar pattern to the results in the table above with the main factors being work commitments 33%, family/carer commitments = 17%, poor health = 8%, too far to travel = 7%, business not relevant/interesting = 6%, absent = 6%. However, in addition to these reasons, the comments received from members identified a number of other issues, in particular –

- (a) other (generally unidentified) matters that the individual prioritised ahead of attendance at Synod, often describing them as 'prior' commitments = 12%,
- (b) local church commitments = 6%,
- (c) the sittings extend too late into the evening, meaning Synod members are too tired and/or their 'work' suffers = 2%, and
- (d) the dinner break is lost time for those arriving from work around 5:30 – 6:00pm = 2%.

11. The full text of all 151 comments received is available to members on request.

Question 4 – Possible changes

12. Almost exactly 2/3rds (66.3%) of respondents indicated there were no changes that could be made which would increase their attendance in future. However, 185 respondents indicated that some changes could make a difference.



13. Interestingly, a total of 273 members provided a comment in response to the invitation to explain their response to this question, which means that 88 of those comments were from members who said no change would increase their attendance. Some of the comments provided information which cannot be used to formulate possible changes (eg, "I am no longer a rep", "no comment", "one-off situation, normally I can get to all sessions", "avoid my children's birthdays", "I come when I am able", "set priority on dates of meetings"). Nevertheless, it is interesting to identify the common themes and suggestions that were evident in the remaining responses.

14. By far the most common aspect of Synod arrangements that people commented affected their attendance has to do with the scheduled sitting times of Synod. The comments received can be categorised as follows –

- Later start – 53 people (22%) thought a later start would be helpful, particularly for those with work commitments, most suggesting 4:00pm or 4:30pm but some favouring evenings only.
- Earlier finish – 32 people (13%) thought an earlier finishing time would be a big help, particularly for those with further to travel and/or early start for work the next day.
- Fewer days – 27 people (11%) favoured fewer meeting days, often noting that having the whole session in one week would make it easier to arrange time off work.
- Weekend – 12 people (5%) suggested part or all of the session be held on a Saturday or Sunday.
- Earlier start – 7 people (3%) would rather the session started earlier in the afternoon, and another 4 people said they would prefer morning sittings rather than evenings.
- Meal breaks – 7 people (3%) suggested shorter meal breaks to allow more time in the evening sitting.

15. The content and scheduling of Synod business was seen by quite a number of people as a factor discouraging attendance. The comments covered quite a range of issues, but could be categorised as follows –

- Debate over presentations – 21 people (9%) thought relatively more priority should be given to the debates leading to decisions, rather than what was seen as over-lengthy presentations or material that was really for information only (mission hour, change of parish status, Bible studies, interviews, services).
- Policy over procedure – 17 people (7%) suggested proportionally more time should be devoted to the major policy issues and strategic direction initiatives, with the more procedural/administrative matters delegated to Standing Committee or handled in a sort of ‘pre-sitting’ time of Synod (which could allow for a later start time or fewer sitting days for the main business of Synod).
- Streamlined debate – 13 people (6%) wanted some change to the process by which Synod considers the matter brought before it. Of those 7 people (3%) wanted the discussion of some topics shortened, 4 people (2%) suggested not allowing extensions of time for the speaker, and 2 people (1%) asked that the process be better explained or made simpler.

16. 19 people (8%) made suggestions relating to the location of Synod, suggesting having meetings closer to the geographic centre of the Diocese (Parramatta or Liverpool/Campbelltown were most frequently mentioned) would reduce the travel time from the west and south and lead to an increased attendance. A few people also asked that consideration be given to arranging billets or paying for accommodation for those for whom the long travel time made it necessary to stay near the city during Synod.

17. 13 people (5%) indicated that car parking arrangements impact their attendance. The most frequent concern was the time taken to exit the car park at the end of the evening sitting made it an even later night for those with a long way to travel. The day-time parking cost was also a concern to some, being seen as a disincentive to attending the afternoon sittings of Synod.

18. There were a few suggestions relating to the use of technology as an alternative to physical attendance with 3 people suggesting live video streaming the sittings to a suitable venue in Wollongong and another person proposing the option of participation via a web link.

19. The full text of all 273 comments received is available to members on request.

Attendance levels at other diocesan synods

The information in this table was compiled from responses received from 16 of the other 22 dioceses to an email sent by the Diocesan Secretary on 22 May 2014 asking for an estimate of member attendance levels at their synods.

Diocese	Total number of Synod members	% member attendance levels
Sydney, NSW	805 (2013)	59.5% (2013) 60.8% (2012) 61.6% (2011) 60.8% (2010) 60.8% (2009)
Adelaide, SA	300	85% Clergy 90% Laity
Armidale, NSW	150	95%
Ballarat, VIC	–	95%
Bathurst, NSW	–	–
Bendigo, VIC	–	97%
Brisbane, QLD	–	75% Clergy 85% Laity
Bunbury, WA	102	95%
Canberra and Goulburn	–	–
Gippsland, VIC	130	92%
Grafton, NSW	–	89-93%
Melbourne, VIC	–	62% Clergy 76% Laity
Newcastle, NSW	300	90%
Northern Territory	85	90%
North Queensland, QLD	–	–
North West Australia, WA	–	92%
Perth, WA	420	91%
Riverina, NSW	–	–
Rockhampton, QLD	90	95%
Tasmania	174	93%
The Murray, SA	–	–
Wangaratta, VIC	–	–
Willochra, SA	105	98%