

## CONFERENCE REPORT

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# Canons of the Church of England Reading Groups

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When was the last time that 50 people gathered regularly to study the canons of the Church of England? Face-to-face meetings were difficult throughout much of 2020 because of the measures introduced to impede the spread of COVID-19. In response, the Ecclesiastical Law Society decided to increase its range of online activities. One such initiative was the establishment of the Canons of the Church of England reading groups. Advertisement to the members of the Society resulted in 50 people gathering in four groups led by the Revd Stephen Coleman and by me. In fact there was more interest than we could accommodate, and there has been a growing waiting list.

The groups meet for an hour each fortnight, using the Zoom meeting technology. Each canon is read in turn and then discussed. Biblical, theological, legal and historical questions are asked. Very often, profoundly practical questions arise: about baptismal policy in a parish, say, or the authority behind liturgical sources. We have considered some of the big questions (for example, if canons cannot bind the laity, why do so many purport to instruct lay people what they should do?) and we have gone into the detail (for example, how consistently are terms such as ‘minister’ and ‘member’ used throughout the canons?) It’s a particular joy that each of the groups is drawn from the diverse ranks of the society: lawyers, academics, clergy and lay church members all bring their varied experiences. Alongside members of the Church of England, ecumenical colleagues and those from overseas provide a very welcome broader context.

Working from a text keeps the discussion focused and grounded. Reading it aloud concentrates the mind. The relatively short length of each canon enables several to be read and discussed in each hour, and we are able to cover enough ground that the topics remain interesting for a group lasting many months.

These meetings could probably not have taken place without the use of videoconferencing technology. An hour a fortnight is a much more manageable proposition when there is no travel time to a central location. At the time of writing, we expect to conclude around the end of 2020. Already some members are asking what other ecclesiastical law texts could be studied in the future, using the same method.

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