

GENERAL SYNOD

COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Council of Oriental Orthodox Churches

in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

- 1) At this group of sessions of the General Synod, we welcome His Grace Bishop Angaelos, who has been appointed as the first representative of the Council of Oriental Orthodox Churches in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland (The Council), following an invitation by the Business Committee under Standing Order 113 (a) to the Council to nominate a representative. Bishop Angaelos is the President of the Council, and Co-Chair of the Anglican Oriental Orthodox Regional Forum, and the metropolitan of the Coptic Church of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.
- 2) The Oriental Orthodox is one of the major Christian traditions with a presence in this country, which has not hitherto been represented at the General Synod. With the addition of a representative of the Council of Oriental Orthodox Churches to the group of ecumenical representatives of the Synod, this significant gap has been filled.
- 3) The six Oriental Orthodox churches - Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean and the (Indian) Malankara - are in communion with each other and are also called ancient Oriental, lesser Eastern, and pre- or ante-Chalcedonian churches. They represent an ancient and distinct Christian tradition (and should not be confused with the Eastern Orthodox churches.
- 4) They are churches of the first three ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus) but did not accept the Christological statement of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which refers to two natures united in the one person of Christ. Their position has often been described as mono-phsitate, but this description arises out of a misunderstanding and they prefer to be described as 'miaphysite' (one united nature), referring instead to the one nature of the incarnate Word, which is a union of the divinity and the humanity of Christ, following the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria.
- 5) Recent accounts of the Council of Chalcedon suggest that factors other than the purely doctrinal were at work to cause the schism which followed between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Churches of Byzantium and Rome after 451, which were reinforced by subsequent lack of communication between them.
- 6) In 2002 the Anglican Oriental Orthodox International Commission produced an agreed statement on Christology which was submitted to the Anglican Communion and the authorities of the Oriental Orthodox Churches for consideration in the hope that an agreement on Christology between our two traditions was now possible¹. The Agreed Statement took account of conversations between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, which began in 1964, and which proposed that the mutual anathemas which the two traditions pronounced on one another should be lifted, the common declarations between the Pope and a number of the Oriental Orthodox Heads of Churches and also the 1994 agreed statement on Christology of the Reformed-Oriental Orthodox

¹ The Agreed Statement on Christology is available at: [Unity Faith and Order - Dialogues - Anglican Oriental Orthodox](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/oriental/docs/2002christology.cfm). URL: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/oriental/docs/2002christology.cfm>

Dialogue. Anglican Oriental Orthodox conversations are at present in abeyance, but significant work is being done to plan for future conversations.

- 7) More local relations between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Church of England are maintained through the Anglican - Oriental Orthodox Regional Forum, of which the Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe, the Right Revd Dr Geoffrey Rowell is the Anglican Co-Chair and also co-chair of the International Anglican-Oriental orthodox dialogue. A copy of the Forum's Aims and Objectives adopted in January 2011 are given in Appendix 1.
- 8) The Oriental Orthodox presence in this and other western countries has increased significantly in recent years, to some extent due to the lack of opportunities held out to the Christian communities in their home countries. It is difficult to assess the number of Oriental Orthodox Christians in this country, but the following gives an indication of the spread:
 - a) *The Armenian Apostolic Church in the UK and Republic of Ireland.* The Armenian population in the UK is about 18,000. There are three main church centres of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the UK, whose primate is the Rt Rev Dr Vahan Hovhannessian, who was ordained bishop by HH Catholicos Karekin II at Holy Etchmiadzin in Armenia on 6 November 2011.
 - b) *The Coptic Church in the UK and Republic of Ireland (Incorporating the British Orthodox Church).* There are at least 40 parishes of the Coptic Church in the UK, including 9 parishes of the British Orthodox Church. These parishes are under the jurisdiction of four bishops, and the metropolitan, H.G. Bishop Angaelos, who is a member of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Church. He is based at the Coptic Centre in Stevenage, from where he has a very effective youth ministry. The Centre welcomes many Anglicans, and has hosted CMD events for clergy in St Albans Diocese.
 - c) *The Eritrean Orthodox Church in the UK and Republic of Ireland.* The number of Eritrean Orthodox Parishes in the UK is unavailable. Bishop Markos is the leader of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in the UK, and is a member of the Eritrean Holy Synod. The Eritrean Orthodox Church became autocephalous (self-governing) in 1993.
 - d) *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the UK and Republic of Ireland.* There are nine branches of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and new congregations continue to be planted. His Eminence Abuna Antonious is the Diocesan Bishop of Western Europe, and has his headquarters in London.
 - e) *The Indian (Malankara) Orthodox Church in the UK and Republic of Ireland.* Information about the number of Indian Orthodox parishes in the UK is unavailable. His Grace Dr Matthews Mar Thimonios is the Diocesan Metropolitan for the UK. The Indian Orthodox Church declared itself to be autocephalous in 1912, although a part of the church remained in the Syrian Orthodox Church.
 - f) *The Syrian Orthodox Church in the UK and Republic of Ireland, incorporating the Malankara (Jacobite) Syrian Orthodox Church.* There are at least 7 parishes of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the UK, which is a Patriarchate Vicariate of the Universal Syriac Church, headed by Archbishop Athanasius Dawood. A further 20 parishes of the Malankara Syriac (Jacobite) Orthodox Church are under their own metropolitan.
- 9) All the Oriental Orthodox Churches present in the UK are members of the Council of Oriental Orthodox Churches, of which Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic Church is the current chair. The Council as a whole is a member of Churches Together in England and of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. From 2006 to 2010 H.G. Bishop Nathan

Hovhannisian, when he was metropolitan of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the UK, served as a president of CTE, until his return to Armenia. In July 2009, H.G Bishop Nathan and H.G. Bishop Angaelos, the metropolitan of the Coptic Church in this country, were both guests of the General Synod, and in 2008 they both attended the Lambeth Conference.

- 10) The Archbishops of Canterbury and York last year designated the Council under the Church of England (Ecumenical Relations) Measure 1988, so the member churches of the Council are now churches to which the Measure and the Ecumenical Canons apply.
- 11) At parish level, one of the most important ways in which Oriental Orthodox churches and the Church of England interact is through the sharing of church buildings. Some of these are long standing arrangements, as for example at St Andrew by the Wardrobe Blackfriars, where St Gregorios Indian Orthodox Church has worshipped since 1978, and at St Mary le Bow Cheapside where St Thomas Syrian Orthodox Church (Malankara Jacobite Syriac Church) has worshipped for 10 years. All the Oriental Orthodox churches are on the increase in this country, and rely greatly on the ministry of hospitality provided by the Church of England and other ecumenical partners.
- 12) The Oriental Orthodox Churches represent an important Christian tradition, because of their ancient origins and history, and their contemporary presence in the Middle East, North Africa and South East Asia. Globally, there are over 50 million Oriental Orthodox Christians.
- 13) Each of the autocephalous churches has a distinct history and it is not possible to generalise about their position within the society and in relation to the government of their home countries. In Egypt there have been recent incidents of Coptic Churches being attacked and there is some uncertainty about how the recent change in government will affect the 10 million Copts in Egypt. In Syria, the recent civil unrest has also produced fears among the Syrian Oriental Orthodox Christians about their vulnerability under a possible new regime. The presence of H.G. Bishop Angaelos at sessions of the General Synod will enable us to be more aware of the experience of minority Christian communities in the Middle East and elsewhere. The General Synod will also be enriched by the presence and perspective of this ancient Christian tradition.
- 14) As we welcome Bishop Angaelos, members of the General Synod are urged to pray for our Oriental Orthodox fellow Christians, who are experiencing so much instability and pressure in their home countries.

+ GEOFFREY GIBRALTAR
Co-Chair, Anglican - Oriental Orthodox Regional Forum
16 January 2012

Appendix 1: The Aims and Objectives of the Anglican Oriental Orthodox Regional Forum

- 1) The Anglican Oriental Orthodox Regional Forum is the result of international dialogues but does not seek to duplicate the theological work of these dialogues.
- 2) The aims of the Anglican Oriental Orthodox Regional Forum are:
 - a) To receive and consider the documents from international dialogues between:
 - i) The Anglican Communion and the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches.
 - ii) The Anglican Communion and the individual Oriental Orthodox Churches.
 - iii) Other dialogues on both sides that impact on our relationship.
 - b) To take note of, discuss and explore relevant developments between both Communions, and to explore local relevance and implications.
 - c) To encourage opportunities for common prayer and worship within the discipline of our respective Churches.
 - d) To give our people and beyond, hope regarding the search for the greater unity of the Church.
 - e) To discuss current pastoral, social, political and other issues.
 - f) To explore and bear common witness, making representations (such as issuing statements) where appropriate.
 - g) To discover and educate one another, our clergy and laity about each of our traditions.
 - h) To work to achieve a greater unity expressed in common life and witness.
 - i) To inform our respective Church hierarchies and faithful of the work of the Anglican Oriental Orthodox regional Forum.

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