

Synod summary

The Church of England's 'parliament', the General Synod, met at Church House, Westminster from 6 – 9 February, 2012. Members debated a range of issues.

Loyal address to Queen

The Synod opened with the approval of a Loyal Address to H. M. the Queen on her Diamond Jubilee.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, moved: 'That this Synod congratulate most warmly Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on her Diamond Jubilee and approve the submission to Her Majesty of a Loyal Address along the lines indicated in the Second Notice Paper.' The motion was carried without debate. By coincidence the opening day of Synod (Feb 6) was the 60th anniversary of King George VI's death and therefore of The Queen's Accession.

Women bishops

The Synod spent a significant amount of time on the major legislative process designed to make it possible for women to be bishops while also making some provision for those who, for theological reasons, will not be able to receive their ministry. This was Synod's first opportunity to engage with that process since it was elected 18 months ago.

After a long debate on a diocesan synod motion, members voted in favour of an amended which asked that the House of Bishops should not amend the draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure "substantially". At its May meeting the House of Bishops will decide what amendments, if any, to make to the draft legislation and whether it should be returned to the General Synod for Final Approval. If amendments are made, it will fall to the two archbishops, the two Prolocutors (chairs of the House of Clergy) and the chair and vice-chair of the House of Laity to determine, acting in a quasi-judicial capacity and having received legal advice, whether those amendments alter the 'substance of the proposals embodied' in the legislation (which would require it to be approved again in its final form by a majority of the dioceses before it could go back to the Synod for Final Approval).

In May 2010, the House of Bishops set up a Working Group, drawn from all three Houses of Synod and chaired by the Rt Revd Nigel Stock, Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich. It was charged with drafting an illustrative Code of Practice in connection with the draft legislation before Synod to enable women to be ordained as bishops. At the Synod meeting there was a presentation on the illustrative Draft Code of Practice by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, who also took questions. It is not legally possible for the terms of the Code of Practice which the legislation requires to be settled in advance of legislation being passed. As a result, the House of Bishops has not yet taken any decision on the Working group's proposals.

Wedding and funeral fees

The Synod approved an Order (the Parochial Fees and Scheduled Matters

Amending Order 2012) – after a debate on a number of amendments - that completes a new framework for the charging of fees for weddings and funerals. Wedding fees, including publication of banns, will rise from £296 to £415 and funeral fees from £102 to £160. The aim was to make the fees more transparent and uniform, while giving parishes control over certain items that would be considered extras, and to ensure that the amounts charged reflect the cost of providing the services concerned. The new fees include the costs of lighting and administration but do not take into account extras like heating, organists, bellringers and vergers. The Bishop of Ripon and Leeds the Rt Revd John Packer introduced the Amending Order.

Recent violence in Nigeria

The Synod debated and carried nem. con. a motion moved by the Bishop of Durham, the Rt Revd Justin Welby, who has recently returned from a visit to Nigeria: 'That this Synod, gravely concerned at the desperate plight of Christian communities in parts of Nigeria, as described in GS 1861, request the British Government to do all it can to support those in Nigeria seeking to protect religious minorities of all faiths and enable them to practise their religion without fear.'

Assisted suicide

A Private Member's Motion from Mrs Sarah Finch (London) was debated: 'That this Synod express its concern that the Independent Commission on Assisted Dying is insufficiently independent to be able to develop proposals which will properly protect the interests of vulnerable and disabled people.'

Following the debate and amendments (intended in part to update the motion to developments since the motion was put down) Synod supported the motion in the following form:

'That this Synod

- a) express its concern that the Independent Commission on Assisted Dying was insufficiently independent to be able to develop proposals which will properly protect the interests of vulnerable and disabled people;
- b) endorse the responses to the Commission on Assisted Dying referred to in paragraphs 7 and 8 of GS 1851B;
- c) affirm the intrinsic value of every human life and express its support for the current law on assisted suicide as a means of contributing to a just and compassionate society in which vulnerable people are protected; and
- d) celebrating the considerable improvement in the quality of care of the dying brought about by the hospice and palliative care movements and by the input of clinicians, clergy and others, encourage the Church's continued involvement in the wider agenda of the care of those approaching the end of their lives and the support of those caring for them.'

Anglican Alliance for Relief, Development and Advocacy

The Synod heard a presentation from the Alliance director Sally Keeble, a former UK International Development Minister, about the work of the Alliance around the world. She also took questions from members. The Alliance was established by the Archbishop of Canterbury and grew out of the 2008 Lambeth Conference.

It aims to co-ordinate the work of the Anglican Communion internationally on relief and development issues.

Joint URC service of reconciliation

During Synod there was a joint service with the United Reformed Church (URC), in Westminster Abbey marking both the 350th anniversary of the departure from the Established Church of those who felt unable to accept ordination by bishops and use the Book of Common Prayer and also the 40th anniversary of the inauguration of the URC, which took place in the Abbey. Events such as the execution of William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, and of King Charles I, whom the Church of England honours as a martyr, and the sufferings both of Anglican clergy during the Interregnum and of nonconforming ministers after 1662, were acknowledged with sadness. The Archbishop of Canterbury preached and the Archbishop of York, together with Mrs Val Morrison and the Revd Dr Kirsty Thorpe, moderators of the General Assembly of the URC, led a litany of penitence and act of commitment, to mark closer relations between the two churches.

Eucharistic prayers for children at Communion

The Synod is in the process of authorizing new Eucharistic Prayers for use at services at which there are significant numbers of children present - at a Communion service in a church school, for example. They have been revised in the light of members' comments and Synod considered the revised texts with a debate on a Report by the Revision Committee which was chaired by the Rt Revd Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry. Members voted to take note of the report and the business now stands committed to the House of Bishops. The House will decide in May what amendments (if any) to make to the texts and whether to return them to the Synod for Final Approval (probably in July).

Changes in Higher Education funding for clergy training

The Synod received a presentation from the Rt Revd Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield, about how the Church plans to respond to changes in the funding of higher education which will have a significant impact on the cost of training new clergy. At present, ordinands receive degrees and certificates from 19 different universities. The proposal is that the Church of England, with its partner churches, should establish a single suite of HE awards with a single set of validation arrangements. Some ordinands will continue to study for general theology degrees of universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, but for those on courses leading to a qualification specifically designed for ordinands there will only be one set of qualifications. Bishop Croft also took questions.

Reform of House of Lords

A Private Members Motion from Professor Anthony Berry (Chester) was debated, amended and approved in the following form:
'That this Synod, welcoming both the Archbishops' submission to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the draft Bill on House of Lords Reform and the extension of the Episcopal group on Lords Reform to include members of the other

two Houses of Synod:

invite the extended group to bring to the February 2013 group of sessions

- (i) an assessment of the implications for the Church and nation of any Bill to be brought forward by the Government, and
- (ii) recommendations for changes in custom and practice to accommodate any new requirements placed on the Church.'

Health Care debate

The Church of England has always had a strong commitment to the ideals of the NHS. A motion moved by the Bishop of Bristol the Rt Revd Mike Hill (Vice-Chair of the Mission and Public Affairs Council) was debated, amended and overwhelmingly supported by Synod members in the following form:

'That this Synod, mindful of Our Lord's ministry of healing and his charge to his disciples to heal the sick in his name:

- (a) affirm the ministry of all who promote health and wholeness in body, mind and spirit, and, recognising in particular the role of chaplains in the NHS as an expression of the Church of England's commitment to minister to all in the community, whether as patients or healthcare workers, call upon Her Majesty's Government to ensure that chaplaincy provision remains part of the core structure of a National Health Service committed to physical, mental and spiritual health;
- (b) call upon Her Majesty's Government to apply as the test to any proposed changes to the NHS whether they are best calculated to secure the provision throughout the country of effective and efficient healthcare services provided free at the point of delivery and according to clinical need;
- (c) commend the work of mission agencies and the networks of the Anglican Communion in embodying the churches' contribution to health and wholeness and promoting fairer sharing of health resources worldwide.'