

New Synod debates the Big Society and the Anglican Communion Covenant

Her Majesty The Queen inaugurated the Ninth General Synod of the Church of England in Church House, Westminster on Tuesday 23 November.

The Inauguration ceremony followed a celebration of the Eucharist in Westminster Abbey, at which the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, presided and Dame Mary Tanner (a President of the World Council of Churches) preached.

This Synod reflected some significant changes amongst its membership: 35% of the elected members of the General Synod were starting their first ever five-year term; the proportion of elected clergy who are female has increased from 21% to 28%; and women now make up 46% of the elected laity membership (up from 40%). Both newly elected and returning Synod members had attended an induction seminar in Church House on the Monday.

In her address, Her Majesty described the opening of a new Synod as a moment both for giving thanks for the witness of those who had gone before, and for praying for wisdom in seeking to balance change and continuity in the decisions lying ahead.

The Queen emphasised the importance of two forthcoming anniversaries: four hundred years since the publication of the Authorised Version of the Bible commissioned by King James, and two hundred years since the foundation of the National Society for Promoting Religious Education, both of which had had a lasting impact on the life of the Church and the nation.

The November group of sessions continued with regular business in the afternoon of Tuesday 23 November, until late afternoon on Wednesday 24 November. In his first Presidential Address to the new Synod, the Archbishop of Canterbury reflected on issues coming to the Synod, including the Anglican Communion Covenant and the Big Society, and for the need for a process of listening, engagement and theological debate.

The Big Society

The Big Society is a major theme of the new Government and is of considerable relevance to the role of religious bodies, including the Church of England. In June, the Bishop of Leicester sponsored a debate in the House of Lords on the concept of the Big Society. The Mission and Public Affairs Division has been in discussion with Government ministers to consider ways the Church might work in partnership with the Government to promote greater social cohesion.

The debate in Synod was intended to enable the Church to understand the issues concerned more deeply and prepare dioceses and parishes to feel better equipped to respond at local level.

Anglican Communion Covenant

The idea of an Anglican Communion Covenant was first proposed in the Windsor report of 2004, following developments in relation to same-sex partnerships in North America. It was envisaged that the Anglican Covenant would “make explicit and forceful the loyalty and bonds of affection” which govern the relationships between the Churches of the Anglican Communion. A text of the Covenant was sent last December to all the Churches of the Anglican Communion for their approval.

The House of Bishops agreed in May to commend the Covenant to the Synod for adoption. Synod formally considered the Covenant before referring it to dioceses for consideration by the diocesan synods. The draft Act of Synod will return to the Synod in due course for Final Approval, possibly in 2012.

Other Legislative Business

The Church of England Marriage (Amendment) Measure was introduced at the November group of sessions to give effect to the resolution passed by the Synod in July, calling for the introduction of legislation to enable a diocesan bishop to give directions allowing those who have a 'qualifying connection' with a particular parish to marry in any church within the benefice of which that parish forms a part.

Two other pieces of legislation came to the Synod for approval as the remaining steps in the process of preparing for the introduction of 'Common Tenure' early in 2011.

Background papers for each debate, alongside links to an audio archive of each session, are available at:

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/about/gensynod/agendas/nov2010/index.html>