

1.18 GENERAL SYNOD

A Synodical Tradition

In the earliest days of Christianity, Christian people gathered together in order to try and identify God's will for them as individuals and as a community of people. Those early assemblies became an important part of the heritage of Christianity. The Synods of the modern Anglican church derive from that tradition. They represent the belief of the early Christians that God gave gifts to each and that God's spirit guided the whole community. So the whole church was to meet together to seek God's will. In modern times that has happened by Synods which have been made up of representatives of the wider church.

The Synod is a way of coming together as a group of Anglican Christians to share concerns about our Christian faith and practice and to discern God's will for us as a Christian community. This sharing takes place through common worship, legislative processes, considering motions, information sessions and informal fellowship.

Historically the Church has used parliamentary models in decision-making because for many centuries parliament was the way in which decisions were made in the Church of England because of the established position of the church. In Australia, that has not been our relationship with the state and we have taken over parliamentary models for decision-making almost by accident.

General Synod exists in order to shape how we relate to each other as a national Christian community and how we might be faithful in this society, for its spiritual, moral and social welfare.

According to our Constitution the General Synod comes together as a community which holds the Christian faith as professed by the Church of Christ from primitive times. It receives all the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being the ultimate rule and standard of faith, given by inspiration of God. The Synod is committed to obey the commands of Christ to reach His doctrine, to administer His sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion and to uphold and preserve His discipline and preservation of the three orders of bishops, priests and deacons in the sacred ministry. These represent not only our shared heritage but our shared commitment.

Section 26 of the Constitution grants power to the General Synod to:

- Make canons, rules and resolutions relating to the order and good government of our Church, including canons in respect of ritual, ceremonial and discipline;
- Make statements as to the faith of our Church;
- Declare its view on any matter affecting our Church;
- Declare its view on any matter affecting spiritual, moral or social welfare; and
- Take such steps as may be necessary or expedient in furtherance of union with other Christian communions.

Over recent General Synods, some alternative methods of decision-making have been implemented for the management of amendments to bills and motions and for group discussion to facilitate the

way forward on complex or contentious issues. Successful innovations have been incorporated into the Standing Orders and continue to evolve.

Between sessions of the General Synod, its business is conducted by the Standing Committee and through various Committees, Working Groups, Commissions and Task Forces.

The General Synod is made up of representatives from each of the twenty three dioceses on a proportional basis according to the number of active clergy in each diocese. There are three “houses” in the Synod – the House of Bishops, the House of Clergy, and the House of Laity. Newcastle Diocese has 11 members of General Synod: the Bishop in the House of Bishops, 5 in the House of Clergy and 5 in the House of the Laity. The Synod is presided over by the Primate.

For many years the Synod met in Sydney, the oldest diocese. In recent years it has moved around the country, with the 2010 General Synod held in Melbourne. General Synod meets at least every 5 years, with the next Synod to be held in 2015.

The Standing Committee of General Synod

The Standing Committee is elected by the General Synod when it meets and is responsible for the affairs of the General Synod between meetings. It meets two or three times each year in different locations around the country.

Its membership is –

1. The Officers of the Synod
 - The Primate, who is the President
 - The Chair of Committees of the Synod
 - The General Secretary of the General Synod, and
 - The elected lay and clerical Secretaries of the General Synod.
2. Representative Members
 - The five Archbishops
 - Three elected Diocesan Bishops
 - Nine elected members of the House of Clergy which includes Assistant Bishops
 - Nine elected members of the House of Laity
 - Two elected members of NATSIA

Commissions

Eight Commissions, made up of people with expertise in the particular areas have been established to respond to requests for advice referred to them from the Primate, the Standing Committee, or the General Synod. They are the:

Doctrine Commission	Ministry Commission
Liturgy Commission	Church Law Commission
Ecumenical Relations Commission	Professional Standards Commission
Public Affairs Commission	Women’s Commission

Working Groups

These are established by the General Synod or its Standing Committee to deal with specific matters that require the attention of a small group of representative specialists. These matters need to be of a national significance as each of the twenty-three dioceses are responsible for dealing with their own regional or local life or mission.

Task Forces

The Standing Committee of General Synod can establish a Task Force when it believes that the Church would benefit from specific advice on any issue, project or activity in any area of the Church's Mission. Task Forces typically focus on the dynamics of life in contemporary Australia so that the church community and individual Anglicans might live out their faith more effectively.

Legislation

According to the Constitution, the General Synod is able to make canons, rules and resolutions relating to the order and good government of the Church. This includes making or declaring:

- Canons in respect to the ritual, ceremonial and discipline of the Church;
- Statements as to the faith of the Church;
- Views on any matter affecting this Church or affecting the spiritual, moral or social welfare of its people and the people of Australia.

A **Canon** is the name given to any Church legislation that has been passed by the General synod.

A **Bill** is any proposed canon in draft form which is yet to be passed by the Synod.

A **Rule** can be made by General Synod to either prescribe anything necessary to carry out or give effect to a canon, or control and regulate the administration of its affairs, particularly the election or appointment of its officers as well as the authorities, powers, rights and duties of any officer, committee, board or commission of General Synod.

A **Bill** which relates to "the ritual, ceremonial or discipline of the Church" is called a **Special Bill**. It proceeds in the Synod in the normal way until it reaches the stage that "the bill do pass". To pass this stage the bill must receive:

- A vote of at least two thirds of the members present in each house (Bishops, Clergy and Laity). At this point the bill becomes a provisional canon;
- The provisional canon is then referred to the dioceses for consideration. If all the dioceses assent to it, it is duly passed. If some withhold their consent, the provisional canon is then recommended to the next meeting of General Synod. Should it then be approved by at least two thirds of the members of each house then the bill is duly passed.

Constitutional Inconsistency

Canons can be tested to see if they are consistent with the Constitution's Fundamental Declarations or its Ruling Principles. In such cases, the matter is referred to the Appellate Tribunal for a decision. If there is no inconsistency or breach then the Canon comes into force, otherwise the Canon is void.

Canons can be referred to the Appellate Tribunal by twenty five or a third of any house of General Synod. The Primate can also refer matters to the tribunal.