

THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

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This year's General Synod was held, for the first time ever, in Ireland's ecclesiastical capital, Armagh, at the recently constructed City Hotel and Conference Centre, which provided an excellent forum. The occasion was graced by the presence of the leaders of the other three main Churches in the province and by the preaching of the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Synod Eucharist in the recently renovated and refurbished Cathedral.

In legislative terms. Synod was faced, after the recent years of plenty in the shape of an abundant harvest of liturgical Bills, with a near famine. There was only one Bill, to correct a degree of under-funding in the Church's pension scheme, which was passed without opposition, and, indeed, with approval. While no other legislation was forthcoming this year, indications were given that next year legislation will be presented dealing with Synodical Reform, by way of reshaping the Church's courts and tribunals, and by way of changes to the Canon governing marriage; this last following on from changes to the civil law.

While there was little in the way of legislation for Synod to consider, there was plenty of other material for members to get their teeth into. Indeed the Synod was characterised by a number of calls to arms and to change. The Liturgical Advisory Committee, after its years of work leading to the publication of the prayer book, and its success in selling some 110,000 copies, reminded Synod that words were only the beginning of worship and that it was now turning to the provision of liturgical resource material with a view to looking at worship in a multi-dimensional way, with a new emphasis on issues such as art, architecture and the use of space. The Representative Body of the Church, in effect the Church's financial trustees, challenged the Church to recognise that, in these uncertain financial times, if we want to start doing new things, as we must, then we will have to stop doing some old ones. The Church's Youth Department reported on the major structural changes already undertaken and outlined a number of ideas and initiatives designed to develop and enhance youth ministry across the Church. The Council for Mission in Ireland and the Council for the Church Overseas proposed their amalgamation, not as a cost-cutting exercise, but as a timely correction to the Church's priorities. Synod members were reminded that their function was not to maintain the structures of the Church of Ireland, but to contribute to the transformation of society. The Commission on Ministry, in presenting its report, called to mind the famous words of Henry Lyte, that 'change and decay in all around we see'. The Church might, the Commission warned, have to choose between one and the other; between presiding over the management of change or the management of decay. A challenge indeed.