

## GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND 1995

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The legislative content of the Synod agenda this year seemed, at first glance, to be comparatively light. There was, however, in addition considerable interest in a number of motions designed to lead to legislation for General Synod 1996.

In the legislative programme proper only two Bills came before the Synod. The first was brought forward at the request of the Church of Ireland Pensions Board and proposed substantial improvements in the benefits provided from the Pension Fund. The Bill was passed without any substantive amendment. The principal provisions were:

- (i) To reduce the normal pensionable age from 68 to 67.
- (ii) To reduce to 60 the minimum age at which voluntary retirement can be sought.
- (iii) To increase by 1/9th the pensions of most clergy widows.
- (iv) To increase child dependency allowances.
- (v) To ensure that half the members of the Pensions Board should be potential beneficiaries of the clergy Pensions Fund.

The second, very brief, Bill sought to establish a quorum for Select Vestries in order to give a real and visible sense of accountability. The Bill, which was duly passed, provides that the Chairman shall establish a quorum of not less than half the voting membership of the Select Vestry present before proceeding to any business.

There were also three resolutions before the Synod designed to lead to Special Bills. These are required when there is any question of change 'in the articles, doctrines, rites, rubrics or formularies of the Church. . .'. Such motions need a two-thirds majority but, if successful, are treated as the first reading of the Bill which will then be considered in detail a year later, when it will require a two-thirds majority for the Second and Third readings.

The first of these motions sought leave to introduce a bill in 1996 to provide for the regulation of marriage discipline in the Church of Ireland. The proposed Bill begins with an affirmation of the Church of Ireland's adherence to our Lord's teaching that marriage is in its purpose a union permanent and lifelong, for better or worse, till death do them part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and in adversity. It goes on to prohibit the solemnisation of marriage between parties who are within the prohibited degrees.

The bill then sets out the procedure to be followed by any clergyman who is approached with a view to solemnizing a marriage between parties either of whom had been party to a ceremony of marriage with another person still

living. It requires that such a clergyman should seek an opinion from the Bishop as to the advisability of solemnizing the particular marriage and requires him to consider and to take into account the opinion of the Bishop in exercising the discretion, vested in him by law, as to whether or not he should solemnize the marriage concerned. It would be the clergyman's duty to provide the Bishop with the information required to enable an opinion to be formed and the Bishop would be entitled to seek such pastoral other advice as he may require. The Bishop would be expected to communicate his opinion to the clergyman quickly and to declare, in cases where a decree of nullity may have been granted on grounds acceptable to the Church of Ireland that the applicant is *ipso facto* free to marry in Church. In other cases in which a favourable opinion might be given the Bishop would prescribe that the clergyman conduct a private service of preparation for remarriage in Church with the parties involved in such a form as may be provided by regulation before the marriage could take place. The Bill proposed that the legislation should come into force on a date subsequent to the passing of the regulations mentioned. This motion was duly passed by majorities of 89% of clergy, 79.5% of laity, and with the agreement of the House of Bishops.

Legislation will now come forward for consideration in 1996. As is required by Standing Orders amendments have been proposed already as follows:

- (a) To give the Bishop a discretion as to whether or not a service of preparation for remarriage should be used.
- (b) To avoid possible conflicts of interest where either of the parties to the intended marriage is the parent, child, grand-child, brother, sister, nephew or niece of the clergyman or of the spouse of the clergyman by providing for another clergyman to be appointed to deal with the matter in his stead.
- (c) To ensure that the Rector of the parties to the marriage (if not the clergyman concerned) be afforded an opportunity to offer a view.

These proposed amendments will be debated at the Committee stage of the Bill and would require only a simple majority to be adopted.

The second resolution arose out of the report of the Select Committee on the Communion of the Baptised but Unconfirmed. A number of motions were attached to the report. If passed, these would have provided for formal recognition by the Church of Ireland that children who were baptised but not yet confirmed might receive communion in parishes of the Church of Ireland who wished to permit this, following a period of preparation in accordance with guidelines presented with the report. A number of consequential resolutions followed, including a resolution seeking leave to introduce a Bill to the General Synod of 1996 to repeal the final rubric in the Order for Confirmation in the Book of Common Prayer which directs that 'every person ought to present himself for Confirmation (unless prevented by some urgent reason) before he partakes of the Lord's Supper'. The report and resolutions provoked great interest and debate, which continued until brought to an end by a motion to adjourn the matter until the next session of Synod in 1996, when discussion will be continued.

The final resolution proposed a Bill for 1996 to effect amendments to the Alternative Prayer Book so as to remove the existing requirement to transfer the celebration of the Feasts of St Stephen, St John, the Holy Innocents and the Naming of Jesus should they fall on the Sunday after Christmas Day. This motion received the required majorities and will be further considered next year.