

General Synod 2023

Background to General Synod

The first General Synod met in Toronto 130 years ago (1893). Three fundamental decisions were made at that time; that Synod consist of three orders (bishops and equal members from the clergy and laity); that the Provincial system be maintained; and that the Solemn Declaration be adopted as the basis of the constitution. The balance of clergy and laity was modified in the early seventies when one youth member (usually lay) from each diocese was added; today there are four ecclesiastical provinces instead of two. General Synod continues to adhere to the Solemn Declaration, which cannot be amended, as the basis for the constitution.

The first General Synod also laid out specific areas of responsibility delegated by the dioceses and provinces to the national body. These responsibilities include such matters as doctrine and worship, and relations with the Anglican Communion, other denominations, and other faiths - areas where it was seemed important to have a common national vision.

But much has changed since the first Synod. In the early days, Synod concerned itself mostly with the internal government of the Church. Gradually, that changed as the Church began more and more, to see itself as an active player in the life of the nation. During World War II, Synod discussed the internment of the Japanese. The Hendry Report of 1969 was a landmark document calling for changes in the way church and society related to Indigenous peoples. In 1983, General Synod called on the government and the Church to fight the nuclear arms race, reaffirming its stand of 1955, 1962 and 1965. In 1989, Synod discussed the ethics of surrogate motherhood. In 1995 the minimum age of youth members was changed from twenty-five to sixteen years old.

Another significant change took place in 1969 when Synod moved to a unicameral system (a single legislative chamber) for meeting and debate. Formerly, the upper house (the House of Bishops) and the lower house (clergy and laity) met separately and communicated with each other by relaying messages. The change means that there is common debate and bishops now vote publicly, whereas before, the actual breakdown of the bishops' vote was confidential. Bishops continued to vote separately from the clergy and laity until 2013.

A series of strategic plans, frameworks, visions, and consultations have shaped the priorities of the General Synod over the years. Two in particular "Vision 2019" and "Embodying God's Call", have recently served as touchstones for the national ministries of the General Synod.

Generally speaking, Synods today are less formal, less confrontational, and more open and conciliatory than they once were. The formal dress and lengthy speeches have given way to a more relaxed atmosphere and a sense of being "in this together" - not to mention shorter speeches!