One hundred years ago, the passing of the Church Assembly (Powers) Act in December 1919, created the Church’s own legislative body, the National Church Assembly. Prior to this, Church business had to be passed through Parliament, but the relationship between Parliament and Church was changing. By the late nineteenth century, Parliament was no longer exclusively comprised of Anglican MPs: Catholics, Quakers and atheists could be elected and take their seats. The new body would bring Church governance back within the Church of England, and help to alleviate the strain on a very full parliamentary timetable.

The upheaval of the First World War meant society’s expectations of the Church and its clergy were changing, and this, combined with a growing sense that the Church should be a separate, spiritual entity, distinct from the state, gave rise to the call for the Church Assembly.

The Assembly’s three houses – of bishops, clergy and laity – sat for the first time in June 1920, and over the next hundred years were supported by a plethora of boards, councils and working groups set up to advise on specific issues. Some subjects, however, remained the preserve of Convocation, which limited the involvement of the laity in these areas. To address this, the Assembly was reconstituted as the General Synod in 1969 taking on most of the responsibilities of Convocation.

Questions of morality, spirituality and family life made frequent appearances in the debating hall. The Church of England Moral Welfare Council was founded as an advisory board in 1939 and eventually incorporated into the Assembly’s Board for Social Responsibility. The Council aimed to provide ‘coordination of thought and action in relation to the place of sex, marriage and the family in the Christian life’. It produced, collected and circulated material on moral welfare, providing visiting lecturers to universities and theological colleges, and to bring together work undertaken in the dioceses. The topics broadened throughout the twentieth century to include addiction, adoption, birth control, brothels, the cinema, illegitimacy, mental health and prostitution.

Hand in hand with an interest in the family and home, went a concern for the spiritual wellbeing of the population. The Spiritual Discipline of the Laity Committee, established in 1946 hoped that those outside the Christian community would be ‘confronted’ with the witness of a corporate, humble and conscientious church practice. The Committee produced a report exploring Christian initiation, church attendance, fasting and almsgiving.

“We fear that there is a widespread idea that being a Christian requires a certain emotional rapture, and that many men are hindered from coming to church because they do not think they can achieve such ecstasy”

Spiritual Discipline of the Laity Committee, draft report; CAA/1946/11/3, 1946
The Built Environment

The question of housing was one that the Church had long been involved with. Shelter for the poor and vulnerable was provided as an act of charity, often through the work of religious communities. The foundation of the Church Army in 1882 created the major Anglican voluntary society in the field, and the Church Commissioners had an interest in the subject as landlords. Synod’s Board for Social Responsibility produced a report in 1982 highlighting the scarcity and expense of privately rented accommodation, cuts in government expenditure and changes in the demographics of homelessness. It produced a range of recommendations for action including holding policy makers to account, working with mental health charities and contributing to property purchasing trusts.

The vicinity in which one lived could determine the degree of participation in church life. With large-scale housing areas being created as new towns and suburban development after the Second World War, the Church Assembly was keen to ensure that the Church played a prominent role in these areas. In 1952 the New Housing Areas Committee drew attention to the strain on clergy in existing parishes who were being expected to cater for huge new housing developments, the residents of which were frequently unable to reach a church to attend. It also advised on suitable designs for new churches and halls in a period of restrictions on the construction industry.

“Christian families, used to a full and vigorous Church life, find, on coming to live in a new area…that both distance and lack of means of transport…make the continuance of Church membership almost impossible.”

New Housing Areas Committee report, 1952

Housing

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The following year, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, led, with Synod’s backing, an exhaustive investigation into inner city deprivation. Its report led to the creation of the Church Urban Fund, which distributed over £70 million in its first thirty years to improve social and economic conditions in Priority Areas, and the recommendation of a permanent body to monitor minority ethnic concerns. Work in this area is being continued today by the Archbishops’ Estates Evangelism Task Force.

Urban Priority Areas

“All the signs are that, by a vicious circle of causes and effects, the decline of the quality of life in what have been designated ‘Urban Priority Areas’ is continuing.”

Faith in the City: the report of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, 1985

The Natural World

Through the second half of the twentieth century, the Assembly and Synod became increasingly interested in the natural world and our relationship to it as God’s creation. The Board for Social Responsibility submitted Man in his Living Environment, CA 1771, to the government for use at the 1973 UN conference on the environment. Through a series of reports over the next few decades, Synod discussed cooperation with conservation charities, managing the ecology of churchyards and measures to limit pollution.

“When we see the land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

General Synod paper, GS 718. 1986
International Affairs

The Assembly and Synod’s interests were not confined to national concerns. The Missionary Council of the Church Assembly was created soon after the Assembly was set up, in 1921. Initially, it was interested predominantly in the provision of missionaries but also managed specific appeals, such as the Archbishops’ Appeal Fund for the Church in China (1944). In the post-war era, the Church of England faced a new peace-time challenge, that of Soviet-style Communism, which seemed an aggressive expansionist force. In 1948, the Lambeth Conference denounced Marxist communism, which it regarded as exalting atheism and putting ‘supreme confidence in material progress’. Soon after, the Board for Social Responsibility produced It Could Happen Here, the first of the ‘Crisis’ booklet series exploring the practical, theoretical and doctrinal issues related to communism.

Poverty

Through the second half of the twentieth century, interest in global affairs grew. The living conditions of populations abroad were as much of interest to Synod as were housing and unemployment at home. Synod spent much time debating the Brandt Report in 1981 after it drew attention to world poverty and the divergence of wealth between developed and developing countries. Members of the Church of England were encouraged to donate 1% of their take-home pay to development charities in the 1980s, and in 1991 Synod called on the government to cancel debt to developing countries.

Race Relations

While the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas brought race relations at home to Synod’s attention, apartheid South Africa forced it to consider the situation further afield. Synod debated a number of reports on the political and economic state in the country, including, in 1982, GS 529, which called for the Church Commissioners to ‘cut to a minimum’ their investments in South Africa, and for financial aid to neighbouring countries. Sporting and cultural visits were denounced as they could be misconstrued as approval for the apartheid regime.

The Just War

Engagement with regimes around the world forced Synod to consider another question: the extent to which the use of violence could be justified in the removal of corrupt and tyrannical regimes. In response to grants made by the World Council of Churches to groups associated with armed resistance in 1971, the Board for Social Responsibility formed a working party to look at the principle of the just war. Although opinion was not unanimous, the group concluded that armed resistance could indeed be justified in cases where the administration was ‘palpably tyrannical’, the oppression disproportionate to the government’s need, negotiation had already been attempted and the outcome of the violent venture had a reasonable chance of success.

The issue became all the more pressing in the context of the nuclear proliferation of the Cold War. The use of nuclear weapons was much debated in the early 1980s and Synod did not always agree with the reports presented by its advisory bodies. In 1983, the Board for Social Responsibility recommended that the UK renounce its nuclear deterrent, but in debating the Board’s report, The Church and the Bomb, Synod passed an amendment stating its duty was to prompt the Government to consider ethical questions rather than to encourage a particular response.
Ministry

Although the Church wished to pronounce on all matters affecting society, whether at home or abroad, it couldn’t afford to be distracted from the essential task of providing ministers for parishes. The twentieth century was a period of huge change for the ministry of the Church of England: it was a period which saw the number of serving clergy more than halved, and the population rise by around 50%. The Church’s response was to create the Central Advisory Council for the Ministry, which was to be a Church Assembly council responsible for administrative oversight for all matters relating to ministry. Standardised training methods were introduced, theological colleges brought under central control and candidates from different social and educational backgrounds encouraged to apply.

The Advisory Council worked to ensure a steady supply of ‘good men’ (later also women) replete with the necessary skills for what was an ever changing role. One of the more interesting methods the ACCM employed was a mobile exhibition in the shape of a VW Camper fitted with ‘moving visuals’ and a public address system, that would visit colleges, careers conventions and schools to show the opportunities ministry offered.

Women and the Church

Women had long played significant roles in the life of the church: they could become a missionary, a deaconess, endow a church, and were even (occasionally) be elected churchwarden. From its creation, the Church Assembly included women in its House of Laity and the position of women in the Church was increasingly debated. The Central Council for Women’s Church Work (founded in 1930, and officially an Assembly Council from 1942), looked at some of the ways in which women participated in church life and produced a leaflet (right) to encourage wider involvement.

It was not until 1975 that women’s ordination in the Church of England was debated in General Synod, and four years later the Movement for the Ordination of Women was created. Simultaneously, there was an effort to increase the number of women in senior lay roles. In 1986, a group appointed by Synod’s Standing Committee recommended, that the Church effectively headhunt if it were serious about addressing the matter. Seven years later, in 1993, Synod voted to admit women to the priesthood by passing the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure, and in 2014 to amend canon 33 to accommodate the consecration of women to the office of bishop.