

Church of England inches toward women bishops

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LONDON -- Despite considerable opposition, the Church of England Feb. 11 voted to begin the long process of introducing legislation to allow women bishops.

The legislation, approved by the church's General Synod, includes complicated provisions to ensure that opponents of female bishops do not find themselves under a woman's jurisdiction. The protections would be included in a code of practice drafted by the church's House of Bishops.

The vote to move toward women bishops was 281 to 114, with 13 abstentions. The strength of the opposition suggests that when the legislation comes back for final approval sometime after 2010, it may fail to obtain the two-thirds majorities needed among bishops, clergy and laity.

Opposition came not only from those on the church's Catholic and evangelical wings but also from supporters of women bishops like Bishop Stephen Venner of Dover, who felt the provisions to accommodate opponents would be cumbersome and unworkable.

Bishop Graham James of Norwich said the legislation would lead to a damaged and fractured episcopate and voted against the proposal in hopes that "God will show us a better way."

However, the head of the church, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, was surprised that the church had been able to move so far "toward something that just might command a common mind."

Williams said the only remaining question was whether the divisions represent "a narrow but very, very deep gulf" or "a gap between, as it were, two hands stretching to meet."

In other business, the Synod voted overwhelmingly to prohibit clergy from belonging to the far-right British National Party, which aims "to secure a future for the indigenous peoples of these islands." The ban, which also applies to seminarians and church spokesmen, passed easily 322 to 13, with 20 abstentions.

Last year, a list of 12,000 names of British National Party members, including five clergy, appeared on the Internet. None of the five clergy was an active Anglican priest.

In reaction to the vote, British National Party leader Nick Griffin accused the church of being led by clerical Marxists and bishops born in Uganda (Archbishop John Sentamu of York) and Pakistan (Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali of Rochester).

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