

**APPENDIX B****DISPOSAL AND DISPLAY OF CHURCH PLATE****1. BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 In 1997 the Legal Advisory Committee gave an opinion to the effect that all pre-disestablishment church plate was legally vested in the RCB under the terms of the Irish Church Act, freed and discharged from any pre-existing trusts, and that all pre-disestablishment plate is held by the RCB subject only to the powers of the General Synod to order its sale, donation, loan or disposal on such terms as the General Synod shall direct.
- 1.2 In 1998 the General Synod rejected a bill which sought to give permission to the Dean of Cloyne to sell church plate for the maintenance of Cloyne Cathedral.
- 1.3 In the absence of a policy to meet this new situation the Library and Archives Committee was requested by the Chief Officer to draft a policy statement.

**2. PREPARATION**

- 2.1 The Committee considered the following reports:-
  - (a) Report of the RCB Church Plate Sub-Committee, 1972.
  - (b) Treasures on Earth, a report of a working party of the General Synod of the Church of England, 1970s.
- 2.2 The Committee obtained the views of the following:-
  - (a) Professor David Spearman, member of the RCB Church Plate Sub-Committee, 1972.
  - (b) Mr Douglas Bennett, Company of Goldsmiths.
  - (c) Mr Michael Kenny, National Museum of Ireland.
  - (d) Representatives of local museums.

**3. DISPOSAL OF CHURCH PLATE**

- 3.1 Much of the church plate has been acquired in the form of gifts and many of these gifts are memorials. Even if, legally, the trusts which surround these gifts are no longer binding, some will argue that a moral trust to preserve the gift remains. In practical terms, if the Church of Ireland develops a reputation for selling gifts, this is likely to prove a deterrent to future generosity.
- 3.2 There is no significant melt down value for silver. The price of silver is already at its lowest in living memory and is more likely to fall than to rise.
- 3.3 There is no significant market for Irish church plate:-
  - (a) Church plate in general has a limited market because of its nature and the limited number of forms in which it is produced - specific pieces are made for

specific religious purposes, and few of these can be appropriately used in a secular context. In contrast, domestic silver has an enduring utility and therefore a much wider appeal.

- (b) The only Irish church plate which might command significant market value are those pieces which date from before the mid 17th century and some rare provincial pieces. The Church of Ireland has relatively few of these pieces and the unanimous opinion of the experts whom the Committee consulted was that the Church ought never to consider disposing of such pieces.
  - (c) The National Museum, as the principal purchaser in the state for display purposes, already has more church plate than it can display. It would not be interested in acquiring any more Church of Ireland plate, apart from the categories in 3.3(b).
  - (d) There may be a market among private collectors and American institutions but this is likely to be small both in terms of volume and in terms of likely financial returns.
  - (e) If church plate is sold its future use cannot be controlled and the possibility of once sacred objects appearing in offensive secular contexts must be recognised.
  - (f) The practise of museums purchasing and subsequently de-accessioning and selling on objects has become more common, and so sales to museums are no guarantee against subsequent unacceptable usage.
- 3.4 There is a mistaken impression, based on insurance valuations, of the value of church plate. Insurance valuations are invariably considerably in excess of the returns which could reasonably be expected if church plate was put up for sale.

#### **4. DISPLAY OF CHURCH PLATE**

- 4.1 There are a growing number of local museums, which meet acceptable curatorial standards, many of which would be interested in displaying local pieces of church plate. None of these museums has a significant purchase fund and so display would have to be on a loan basis.
- 4.2 There are indications that some cathedrals would be interested in creating "treasuries" for the permanent display of diocesan church plate.
- 4.3 Although the intrinsic value of silver is low and despite the fact that it is virtually impossible to sell stolen church plate, there remains a belief, albeit mistaken, among parts of the criminal fraternity that church plate is still worth stealing. In consequence there are on-going security and insurance implications.
- 4.4 Displays of church plate require appropriate security and, in most cases, this precludes the possibility of permanent displays in parish churches.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

- 5.1 There is no significant market for church plate although there is a residual belief to the contrary among some criminals.

- 5.2 The Church of Ireland ought not to agree to the sale of any church plate which falls into the categories noted in 3.3(b).
- 5.3 The liturgical use of church plate, especially that which has heretofore been considered too valuable for regular use, should be encouraged.
- 5.4 The display of church plate in local museums and diocesan centres should be encouraged. Such display should be subject to formal agreements with the RCB, and should be based on the National Museum of Ireland loan agreement.
- 5.5 The display of church plate in diocesan centres, where such centres can be developed to an acceptable standard, should be encouraged.
- 5.6 The RCB should ensure that it has an accurate inventory of church plate, that the inventory distinguishes those pieces which are of particular note, and that the inventory is kept up to date.
- 5.7 The RCB, together with the bishops, should review the implementation of the sections of the Constitution which relate to the care and custody of church plate.