

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON MINISTRY 2002

PROPOSER: CANON ADRIAN EMPEY, PRINCIPAL CITC, DIOCESE OF DUBLIN

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

It gives me great pleasure to propose the adoption of this report in such an auspicious year for our deliberations on the present and future shape of the ministry of our church. I have no hesitation in commending this report to the members of the General Synod for close examination, not least because the ordained ministry exists primarily to build up the whole ministry of the people of God. The training and formation of all ministry – lay and clerical – is vital to the life and health of the whole community of the faithful.

The report makes it quite clear that we face challenges both in the present and in the future, which will require much hard biting on bullets in place of our normal response in the face of facts, to wit procrastination, obfuscation and deep denial. If you turn to Appendix B, you will see that the current structures of pastoral care of vacant parishes are already stretched to breaking point.

At the outset, it should be assumed that retired clergy are not available anywhere, and that as a matter of principle no parish should organise its affairs on the assumption that we will always have retired clergy to fill the gap. That is a very-short sighted policy (p. 265)

Veteran observers will instantly recognise that this is Church-of-Irelandese indicating that that a large meteor is hurtling our way at close to the speed of light, that few may reasonably expect to survive the impact, and that any dinosaurs – of which there are a number in our church – that survived the last impact 65 million years ago may not get so lucky this time round!

Just sample some of those statistics: we have in the Republic 164 benefices, a significant number of which have no incumbent, catering for just under 600 places of worship. And what do we not plan not to do about it?

A naive native of Neptune, surveying such a scene from his flying saucer, would probably suggest that it would be reasonable in such circumstances drastically to reduce the number of places of worship, given that earthlings have relatively advanced means of private transport, which they show remarkable expedition in using when visiting football games, shopping centres and pubs. Just how wrong our extra-terrestrial pal has got is revealed in the report with disarming frankness: 'The Church of Ireland is extremely reluctant to go down the church closures road to any significant extent, and realistic rationalisation may be ruled out for the foreseeable future'. Tacitus never said it more succinctly.

The only other solutions of offer, including extended Eucharist, locally ordained ministers of the kind used in English dioceses, and Saturday evening worship, either are regarded as not on, or as having been already rejected by the church at one level or another.

It is not entirely true to say that the church has no clear answers. On the contrary, we know exactly what we are not going to do.

Given this less than adventurous approach to present problems, I am somewhat relieved to leave the future in the form of the Summit on Ministry, which will take place in September, in the capable hands of the seconder, the bishop of Meath. However, as principal of the Church of Ireland Theological College, it behoves me to make some comment on the future training of the ministry.

While I am convinced that the training and formation of the full-time ministry will continue to be the primary business of the college, I also believe that in order for that ministry to be effective it has to be exercised in the context of other forms of ordained and lay ministry.

The report alludes on p. 262 to the Auxiliary Ministry. About two fifths of those in training for ordination at present belong to this essential ministry. If it disappeared tomorrow, our diocesan structures would rapidly grind to a halt. Ten years ago auxiliary priests were basically seen as filling the liturgical function of lay readers with the added bonus of being able to celebrate the Eucharist. Today they are an integral part of the diocesan system. Auxiliary clergy find themselves in charge of parishes during increasingly extended vacancies, fulfilling most if not all of the functions of stipendiary clergy. In the light of this seismic shift, we must adjust our training programmes to equip them fully for increased responsibilities. We are already in the process of making some significant changes in this regard, but a very great deal remains to be done. At present our training budget for 22 auxiliary ordinands is the vast sum of 6350 Euro for the year ending June 2002. That's the cost of a second hand Lada, slightly above banger

classification. Believe me, Your Grace, I know about such things! Members of Synod, the time to get real was yesterday.

I could say many things about the potential that is there to make the college a centre for pastoral training for various kinds of pastoral ministry, lay as well as ordained. We must explore new possibilities in networking colleges and in distance learning made possible by the internet. Beyond that again there are ecumenical implications arising out of our ties with the Porvoo churches and the Methodist covenant, which we have scarcely begun to explore. All of these things will impact powerfully on how we cater for the pastoral needs of our church long before 2020, the horizon set for the Summit on Ministry. Your Grace, we are not talking here in terms of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, but of tremendous possibilities that we never there before and which are certainly available if and when the church is prepared to walk rather than talk.

If I may just conclude by paying tribute to Dr Marshall, our vice-principal, who is to retire in August. He has contributed enormously to the life of the college over many years, and he has been a wonderful support to me as I felt my way through all the uncertainties of my new position. He will be greatly missed by staff and students without distinction. We wish him and his wife Margaret every happiness in a well-earned retirement.

Adrian Empey

