

## GENERAL SYNOD 2002

### ***Speech by the Bishop of Meath and Kildare, Chairman of the Ministry Commission, seconding the report of the Commission on Ministry..***

As people throughout the Church of Ireland are aware, the Church's Commission on Ministry is planning a Summit on Ministry to be held in September of this year in Dublin. Clergy and laity from all the dioceses have been invited, and the Summit is envisaged as a fusion of worship, key-note addresses and responses, and smaller scale discussion in teams.

Those of us involved in the Summit are grateful for the support of the Representative Church Body, the General Synod budgeting group and the Priorities Fund, for their financial backing for the project.

Much is expected of the Summit, and we are aware that - whatever else may happen - this task of re-visioning the total ministry of the Church of Ireland, clergy and lay, will only *begin* with the Summit itself. Much will depend on what follows the Summit.. Every part of the Church, and every level of the Church, must be involved in what must be understood as *a process*.

As part of the preparation for the Summit on Ministry, the Ministry Commission asked the different dioceses to outline what they believed to be the key issues in the ministry of the Church of Ireland today.

Representatives of the twelve dioceses met members of the Commission in January and presented their findings. Obviously differing emphases were apparent in the different presentations, but there was also a considerable area of overlap in concern. This commonality might best be expressed as an almost unanimous conviction - from north, south, east, west, urban, suburban and rural - that the traditional model of "parish" was under considerable strain everywhere, and that it had in places virtually collapsed as a structure for either ministry or mission.

The reasons given are also surprisingly uniform -

- An increasingly mobile population in every part of the country means that fewer people are settled permanently in a given area; in addition, socio-economic factors mean that much of the population is not 'at home' for other than a small proportion of each day. The relationship to "Church" is changed utterly, everywhere.
- Changed expectations of ordained ministry - what the people of God perceive the ministry of clergy as being, and how clergy perceive their own ministry - demand that other talents and ministries are utilised energetically in *collaborative ministry*.
- In many areas, liturgical ministry is hugely dependent on 'non-resident' ministry - clergy or lay-readers brought in from outside to take services. What does this say about what worship is?
- Patterns of attendance at worship have changed - the image of "regular churchgoing" is no longer weekly attendance; Expectations of what worship is actually *for* are also changing.
- In most areas, there are far too many buildings for maintenance - this is diverting time and energy away from more important projects.

- The parish is by its very nature an introspective organism, and is less than effective in relating to a wider community.

There would seem therefore to be a number of areas for discussion at very level of church life (and at the Summit itself) arising directly from these themes. They are deliberately phrased in stark terms..

- ❑ What do we actually mean by collaborative ministry?
- ❑ What are the aspects of ministry that need to be restricted to the priest alone?
- ❑ How can the laity be empowered *to wish* to be part of collaborative ministry?
- ❑ How as a Church can we best train people for ministry - ordained and lay ministry - in a world that is changing rapidly?
- ❑ How can the existing parish structures best be 'loosened', to allow for experimentation or adaptation? Can this only be done by cumbersome legislation?
- ❑ What are we to do with our worship?
- ❑ What should people expect from clergy? What should clergy expect from "the Church"?
- ❑ How can people be detached from *buildings*?
- ❑ In Ireland what is mission without proselytisation?
- ❑ How much do we really need to do and to be, in separation from other Christian communities?

Many ideas will be aired at the Summit. Much is expected from it.

The Synod should realise *now* that if this summit is not to join the myriad of conferences and meetings which have pointed to brave new worlds which have then never materialised, then the Synod itself must be ready for courage. Too often we have been courageous and adventurous until the moment for action has come. This time let us realise that if we do not have courage, we have failed God and the future generations of the Church of Ireland.