

PROPOSER'S ADDRESS GENERAL SYNOD BOARD OF EDUCATION

Proposed by Rt Rev Ken Clarke

DRAFT

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Jesus the Teacher is the title of a lesson in *Stepping Out* the third module in the *Follow Me* Primary Religious Education Programme. The context about Jesus teaching his friends to pray is familiar to all of us. The transmission of knowledge, skills and values, through explanation, practice and personal example is at the very core of teaching as a profession and vocation. It is an obvious theme to find in the report of the Board. Synod members will no doubt agree with the tribute paid to the Church of Ireland College of Education in this report but it is important to ask the question as to how many in our community, how many in our schools are acknowledging that teaching is a role to be considered and valued by those making career choices. Recently Dr Peadar Cremin of Mary Immaculate College of Education spoke of seven applicants for each place in that College. The Protestant Community is not generating the same level of interest in the limited number of places in the College in Rathmines. Boards of Management face an enormous struggle to fill vacancies be they permanent, temporary or substitute positions and have had to employ unqualified staff. We may appeal to the Minister for Education to sanction further places in the College and to provide capital funding for that College's development plan but until we clearly say that teaching is an esteemed valued and crucial profession schools at both levels will face a shortage of qualified teachers who are supportive of the ethos of our schools.

The mention of capital funding will have brought a wry smile to those involved in school management. The Minister's promise to bring transparency to the funding of capital projects in schools will be widely welcomed but the famous list has merely pointed to the enormous backlog of work. Three hundred million Euro per year for five years is required in the primary sector alone to deal with the list and national schools like Adare, Powerscourt and Abbeyleix are among

many that haven't made the list but have made application. Canon Merrick will address the issue as it affects second level schools. This Synod needs to say clearly that no child should have to learn or teacher work in premises which are unhealthy and unsafe. A recent circular from this Board to patrons and secretaries of Diocesan Boards urged that schools be creative in the use of the minor capital works grant for small developments in schools. Sadly as part of government retrenchment that grant has been at best delayed and possibly cut.

Boards of Management are corporate bodies involving representation from teachers, parents, patrons and the community. Increasingly the range of responsibilities and demands expect professional expertise from those who are volunteers. Proposals by the Minister to further involve parents and to look at clustering of schools are laudable. The realities of three schools under my patronage in County Leitrim and two in County Roscommon indicate the physical distance alone poses considerable difficulty for the creation of clusters. Clustering for the sharing of expertise is already a common feature on the educational landscape. The Board looks forward to being involved in the discussions leading to the review of the Constitution for boards of management and will press again for a review of the Rules for National Schools last published in 1965.

The inclusion of all children in the mainstream schools has been a significant development in recent years and it brings benefits to all the school community as children with differing abilities work and play together. Increasingly Principals and Boards have been forced to appear unwelcoming to children with special needs because they fear that the immediate enrolment of a child may actual hinder that child's development. This is because the resources be it resource teaching hours, additional teaching space or the provision of safe facilities must be in place when the child's career in school begins. Boards are being dragged through the appeal process as the assessment for such children is not taking place until the child is on the rolls. Equality demands

that children be provided with the necessary resources for an appropriate education and that no child should be disadvantaged by a delay in provision.

I began with a reference to the *Follow Me* programme. The fourth module *Moving On* has been published and planning and development of material for third class (P5) is in hand. Acknowledgement of the tremendous and ongoing support by the Priorities Fund, the Church Education Society and Diocesan Boards together with our Methodist and Presbyterian colleagues has been vital for this programme. Tribute is also due to the editor and writer Mrs Jacqui Wilkinson, to the advisory groups of teachers and the Primary RE Committee under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Meath.

There have been calls for a State primary religious education programme. The reality at school level is that the *Follow Me* programme has been found very acceptable for the children who come from many different religious traditions and attend schools under Church of Ireland or other Protestant patronage. It is acceptable because it is religious education not instruction or formation. These latter aspects are the responsibility of the Church within the parish and congregation.

Pupils taking Religious Education at Junior Certificate level will take the first State religious education examination this year. The Board would urge the Minister to now begin the introduction of the Leaving Certificate programme which has been carefully prepared by the NCCA and would also urge more schools within our sector to take on the challenge of teaching the subject in an effective way. There is also the challenge to the Church to resource teachers and to provide additional courses in the philosophy of religion. In this context one should acknowledge the generosity of the APCK in providing multiple sets of their excellent leaflets for circulation to RE teachers.

Canon McCullagh

It gives me pleasure to propose that the report of the Board of Education be received and adopted.

