

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**REPORT OF THE BOARD FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
(NORTHERN IRELAND)
SECONDED BY THE RT REV ALAN HARPER**

Your Grace,

The Report of the Board for Social Responsibility (Northern Ireland) may be found on pages 409-419 of the Book of Reports.

The role of the Board for Social Responsibility (NI) is to develop a practical response by the Church in areas of social need. The Board provides a social work service, it attempts to raise awareness of current social issues and is ready and willing to encourage and stand alongside clergy and parishes in dealing with local responses to community outreach and community need. The full board meets quarterly and its quarterly meetings in the past year have heard presentations from The Simon Community on the issue of homelessness; from the organisation 'Children are Unbeatable' on the issue of childcare discipline and the rights of parents under existing law to employ "reasonable chastisement"; from the Northern Ireland Council on Ethnic Minorities on the issue of racism, refugees and asylum seekers; and one moving account from an asylum seeker from Sri Lanka describing his and his family's personal story, their reasons for flight and their experience in Northern Ireland. In connection with the issue of homelessness I should record that the Board has supported through the allocation of a grant of £1000, the production and promotion of a pack on homelessness in association with The Simon Community That pack will be supplied to parishes throughout Northern Ireland and copies are available from the BSR stand at this synod. Please visit the stand and receive a copy!

My colleague, Dr Joan Turner, in seconding this presentation, may touch on some of the core activities of the Board in the area of adoption, fertility counselling, support of the Central Belfast Contact Centre, disability access, and the support of parenting courses. I want to make a single, simple point: BSR has the will and the capacity to be the lead agency of the Church Of Ireland's response in the areas of social need and social concern. Clearly we cannot do everything and clearly we have to play to the strengths of the members of the board and our staff. That means that we have to choose with care the issues to be addressed. Nevertheless, the report before you details a high level of effective and successful endeavour. In order to be more successful and more effective, and to have the capacity to undertake involvement in a wider range of opportunities for social engagement, we require two things:

1. We need new blood, younger blood, amongst the membership of the Board. We need to identify and appoint individuals, lay and ordained, who can contribute vision, expertise and enthusiasm to the work and witness of the Church Of Ireland in the area of social engagement.
2. We also need a more predictable and reliable income flow from church based and community based funders to facilitate a coherent approach to social engagement. One of the issues that most plagues voluntary groups and those engaged in facilitating any local response to social need is the difficulty of sustaining socially effective programmes when the criteria and objectives of funders are subject to what seems like capricious change. Huge energies are expended in completing detailed funding applications year after year, often taking up a significant proportion of time that would otherwise be devoted to substantive action, only to discover that criteria or objectives have been changed and projects are left high and dry. It may now be time for the Board for Social Responsibility to develop its own service to assist local applicants in their battle successfully to complete the complex access requirements demanded by funders. Some application forms alone run in excess of eighty (80) pages of information - a daunting prospect for any non-specialist applicant!

My comments about funders apply specifically to applications for support from public sources. They do not apply to the financial support which the Board receives from parishes and dioceses throughout Northern Ireland and from the Priorities Fund. I want to acknowledge with gratitude that ongoing generosity and also to underscore its importance. It is vital, when seeking major funding from outside providers, to be able to show that the Church itself is ready and able to make a financial commitment to the projects in hand.

Furthermore, in order to have the freedom to contribute financially both to the internal work of the Board and to the work of external partners, the availability of free, independent funding from within the Church is essential. It is the aggregation of relatively small sums from a wide range of donors within the community of the Church which enables the Board to make effective and worthwhile interventions in areas of social need, social education and outreach.

My final remarks, your Grace, focus on the issue of responding to developments in social legislation. For many years a small group of Board members has battled to provide comment to government at the consultation stage in the drafting of legislation and regulations. Requests for comment were once a trickle. They are now a flood! There are in effect five originators of legislation and regulation to which response may be required: the European Union, United Kingdom government and its regulatory authorities, government of the Republic of Ireland and its regulators, Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly and, in addition, local government. Requests may directed towards a variety of destinations with no consistency whatever. We require, and all levels of government require, a 'one stop shop' approach to the public consultation process. I believe that in the Church of Ireland we should put in place a process which enables requests for consultation to be directed to one or perhaps two central addresses rather than the current plethora of addresses. We should provide a filtering mechanism to determine which requests require action, by whom and with what measure of research and support. At present, individual bishops, BSR(NI), the Church in Society Committee, Church House Dublin, Church House Belfast, the Four Church Leaders, the General Synod Boards of Education and many other entities from time to time are approached. In order to make an effective, authoritative and coherent contribution we need an effective, authoritative and coherent system. I plead with the church to set up such a system and inform to government accordingly. We should do all this with genuine despatch!

Your Grace I commend to this house the Report of the Board for Social responsibility (Northern Ireland).