

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

General Synod 2004

Church in Society Committee Report – (Revised) Introduced formally by The Rt Rev Dr Michael Jackson

The famous conductor Sir Colin Davis is reported to have said:

You've got to drop most barriers in making music. Those who keep them up make it impossible.

Throughout the year past The Church in Society Committee has begun what will inevitably be a long process of opening up communication and dropping barriers in a wide range of areas in church life for today and tomorrow. Already the theme of partnership has emerged as important in the challenge which the Committee offers to the members of the Church of Ireland to be and to remain active members of their society at all levels of engagement. This we feel is vitally important if we are to contribute in a collaborative way to the future shape of our society which has all too often shown us in the churches that it gets on very well with its life without us. We have no automatic place in today's Ireland and we need to contribute to the well-being of society courageously, humbly and openly if that place is to be ours in the future. Otherwise we run the risk of being just another special interest group dancing to the tune of our own agenda at the periphery of our society and not working with others dynamically at its heart.

The Committee, first and foremost, is not a group of people whose reason for being is the issuing of statements as an end in themselves. It is however authorized to make statements and disseminate reports in its own name as well as undertaking work requested of it by the General Synod and its Standing Committee. It seeks at all times to think theologically and practically about specific work which it decides to undertake in the five areas which fall within its broad remit: Ecological; Medical and Scientific; Legislative and Political; Social and Theological; European. It seeks also where possible to offer such thinking, work and method throughout the Church of Ireland so as to be implemented locally, in the parishes and communities to which we belong and thereby to encourage active rather than passive participation on the part of members of the Church of Ireland in the life of society.

As a Synod we have emerged this year from many years of liturgical legislation and have The Book of Common Prayer to show for it. With the BCP 2004 combining material old and new creatively side by side there is a new sense of what the contemporary Church of Ireland tradition is and a new eagerness to be part of the expression of this tradition. In the spirit of such excitement, the Church in Society Committee wishes to challenge us all to review, to refresh our worship and discipleship of Christ and to engage with the world around us as we discover new ways of being neighbours of our neighbours.

And to do this a number of barriers have to go. We need to cease to be fearful of theological thinking. In all things we need to let the spirit of the Gospel guide our reading

of the letter of Scripture. In seeking definition and clarity we need to avoid the Siren voices of exclusivity and irrelevance. In worship formal and informal we need to use our liturgies to express our concerns and our celebrations. In our discipleship of Jesus Christ we need to enter once more the world around us as people of faith in the goodness of respect, in the openness of generosity and above all in trust.

The Ecological Group underlines for us the need to engage with a modern, responsible attitude to the earth locally through the Eco-congregation Programme and is providing the liturgical resources to enable this to happen. The European Group monitors closely the varied and exciting developments in Europe not least in this year of significant enlargement and of Irish presidency. Both the Legislative and Political and the Social and Theological Groups in Northern Ireland have contributed to a critical and encouraging approach to the current political stalemate in Northern Ireland identifying the political and social wasteland of dereliction where trust is absent. The Medical and Scientific Group has reported on the pressing questions of Health Rationing and Stem Cell Research and has challenged us as individuals and as an institution to concentrate more on equity than on equality in healthcare provision. The Social and Theological (RI) Group through its emerging Report *Alcohol in the Life of Young People* has asked of us all that we engage on a human level with young people rather than condemning them from afar for their lifestyle; that we recognize that it is the nature of youth to push out boundaries; that we realize that stress levels among 12 and 13 year olds and younger push them to use alcohol and drugs as strategies to block out their problems; that we rediscover the communication across the generations to which the Mothers' Union, so often ahead of us in grasping human and domestic reality, has in this year which is a tenth anniversary of The International Year of the Family alerted us in the following terms: *It is the shared memories of family situations and occasions which deepen the bonds of family for later life. In a society where young people increasingly 'do their own thing' we need to work at that sense of family.*

I should like to thank all who have made the work of the Committee possible in the year past: those who chair its Groups, the members of those Groups, the staff in Church House and all others who have participated in what it has been a most challenging and stretching year. I have pleasure in presenting the Report of the Church in Society Committee to this year's General Synod and in now inviting some of the Chairpersons of the Groups to outline aspects of their work to date.

And let us not forget the words of Sir Colin Davis: *You've got to drop most barriers in making music. Those who keep them up make it impossible.*

The Rt Revd Michael Jackson,
Chairperson, The Church in Society Committee
2004