

Covenant Council Report

Proposer – Rev Dr M J Elliott (Down and Dromore, representing Connor)

Embargoed until Delivery

For this year the report of the Covenant Council is rather like a nil nil draw in football, not because there are no winners and losers, but simply for the fact that there is relatively little to say and which can be brought the attention of Synod. For both of our churches the Covenant itself still feels a little bit like an arranged marriage: The wedding has taken place, and now we are in the delicate, but exciting, process of getting to know one another. However, after the euphoria of the ceremony and the honeymoon, we are now faced with the more pressing and mundane issues of housework and cleaning and gardening. In practice, what we are discovering about this new relationship is that there are strengths and weaknesses on all sides. There is ardent desire in certain quarters (the mention of Monkstown is a case in point), but equally there remains elsewhere a certain degree of reserve, and even some rancour. For all of these reasons, while there must be huge potential for growth, as in any partnership real trust will take significant time.

As a Council, we have met on four occasions during the past seven months and we are beginning to discern an agenda for the best way forward. Our meetings have reflected a deep desire to see the Covenant not as something static and monumental, but rather as the living entity it was always intended to be, with the real possibility of bringing change and enabling mission. In consequence, our discussions have ranged from theological issues such as episcopacy, predestination and perfectionism, to the more practical matters of regional facilitators and local protocols. There are clear differences, not least within each particular denomination, but on the whole Synod

will be pleased to note that the Covenant Council is attaining to the spirit of the Covenant itself. Indeed, tribute should once again be paid to the very stable foundation which was laid for our endeavours by the members, the vision and the achievement of the Joint Theological Working Party.

Archbishop, what must be emphasised in this report to Synod as one of the bodies which ratified the Covenant in the first place is just how essential it is for all of us to find at least one way of implementing this new relationship with our Methodist brothers and sisters. It is good to see elsewhere in the Book of Reports that Methodist colleagues are now able to participate in other central church committees. However, much more remains to be done at the local parish level if this Covenant is to avoid becoming simply another ecclesiastical museum-piece. There is so much common ground which unites us from our history and our doctrine than those few issues on which we differ, and it is here that we must all make more stringent efforts. I am reminded of the story of young schoolgirl who was involved in an R.E. project concerning 'The differences between the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church'. Having done all her research, the answer she finally came up with was as follows: 'The only difference I can see is that the Methodist Church has double-glazing!' It may be simplistic, and yet it serves as a reminder of just how easily we lose sight of the bigger picture.

In conclusion, perhaps the most sobering discussion of our term of office thus far came with a joint presentation from the two respective Youth Ministry Co-ordinators. Their emphasis brought a stark reminder of the fact that for whole swathes of young people, it is not simply the Covenant which is irrelevant, but the very nature of the

church itself. What they crave is reality, and integrity, and something born out of the gospel which purveys the aroma of life. In the rarefied atmosphere of synods, ecclesiastical protocols and theological minutiae, it is essential to bear in mind that our mission is to young people like that and indeed to the wider world of which they are a constituent part. Our calling is to serve those who as yet remain alienated, and if the development of this Covenant Council can in any way facilitate that great objective, then those of us who carry the privilege of being its members will indeed be happy to serve.