

REPORT OF THE RCB. GENERAL SYNOD 2004.

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EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY>

Your Grace, members of Synod.

The Book of Reports clearly sets out the major issues discussed over the past year and the debate that follows should give ample opportunity to deal with specific issues, and hopefully clear up any outstanding points and provide further information because I don't want to take up my allotted time this morning in going through the report page by page.. But firstly let me refer to the various committees whose main role and membership is shown on pages 8 to 11. On your behalf I want to thank all those involved for the many hours they put in and in saying this I very much have in mind the Committee Chairmen. In most cases they are still running their own businesses, being partners in busy professional practices or engaged in a myriad of other time-consuming activities. At times I marvel at their willingness to give so much time to their church. Of the various bodies that I chair, within and outside of the church the most challenging, and enjoyable, is the Executive Committee of the RCB. And as Chairman I must say how much I and the other committee members will miss the presence, following his retirement, of Gordon Linney. His apposite and incisive contributions are, in my view, peerless. While still on thanks let me clearly say how indebted we all are to Denis Reardon and the staff in Church House. There is always a special atmosphere, and welcome in that place and that despite lots of changes in people and systems in recent years. Currently, and it will run for a few year's yet there is a major new information management system being installed essentially to replace that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. And of course that puts further pressure on the staff. The new system incidentally is Church House Information Management System or CHIMP. Many of course have been the references to other chimps or primates. Incidentally I love the definition in my dictionary Collins Concise of primate 'typically having flexible hands, good eyesight, and in the higher apes, a highly developed brain'.

But this morning I want to spend most of my time talking about the work of the Policy and Co-ordination Advisory Committee and some of my own thoughts and ideas that we are going to have to look at with urgency in coming years. Briefly this committee was set up in 1998 to provide a mechanism for formal linkage s between the RCB and the Standing Committee, to develop mutual understanding of issues and resources. As such over the years it has mainly addressed one off issues. But in the last year the emphasis has been to look at the key areas on which the church should focus and act.. Ideas have been submitted, prioritised and sent to the House of Bishops who have responded in a very positive and helpful way. We are now at the stage of looking at the issues, reviewing the

various synod reports to ensure that we take account of the major issues therein, getting submissions in various areas so that we can then prepare a report for the Standing Committee and the Representative Body, seeing how best we can allocate the tasks, what existing bodies or groups should then take the ideas forward, what are the likely financial needs and pressures. The overall aim is to further the spiritual growth of the Church rather than focus on the organisation and structure per se.. It's the vision and mission rather than the management of the status quo. Looking at what we'd like to do and then consider HOW.

Some of the major areas are obvious: training for clergy and laity, new ideas in resourcing and deployment of ministry, flexibility, encouragement of variety, support for clergy and so on. An aside here. In recent years great strides have been made in some of the critical areas of clergy support: I am referring among others to improvements in Stipends and pensions. And yet I guess that stress and pressure on clergy have never been greater. So it's not just about concepts of future ministry, it's about tackling real practical issues as well. I know that some dioceses have imaginative and generous sabbatical programmes for clergy. We should be looking at extending such schemes and seriously addressing the issue of clergy retreat programmes.

I mentioned training for clergy and laity. For the first time ever we now have as many people in training for the Auxiliary Ministry as for Stipendiary. Is the traditional method of a Theological College run on academic lines, still the most appropriate and cost effective?

Let me continue with some of my own thoughts, emphasising that these are not the formed opinions of the Policy and Coordination Advisory Committee.

Inter church organisations. I believe we need to review the time and cost involved in attending many of these meetings and especially the overseas ones. Are we 'punching above our weight'? And why is it that we always seem to have to send at least 2 delegates to the overseas gatherings. Are the trials and tribulations involved so great that we can only send our people in pairs?

BUT we may need to spend more time and money in certain similar areas. We need to work more closely with, and learn from, other churches, especially in this island. We must avoid 're-inventing- the wheel' or think that because we're the Church of Ireland we've got to try and do everything ourselves, alone. Let's look at the Covenant with the Methodist Church in Ireland. I would have thought that all the work leading up to the Covenant was the really hard work. So why are we not now talking about what should be the easier stuff, how maybe to rationalise, streamline whatever, our support structures. Think about it. If this was a commercial merger or whatever we'd have merged the Head Offices and probably done quite a lot more besides!

How best should we respond to social and economic issues. What research capacity should we have to enable the Church of Ireland to take a stronger position on key issues in Irish life? But then again how far should we be going in this area regardless of what we'd like to be doing?

Our structures at all levels. Are they still appropriate today and for the future? Do we have too many dioceses with all that goes with them? We have a propensity in the Church of Ireland to set up a new committee/working party/commission when we hit a new problem. And they run and run. In future when setting up a committee or whatever should we not give them a time limit or encourage them to self destruct after a defined period? Are they still the best way of doing our business? Democracy has always been a very expensive process but is it right that we expect somebody to give up 2 days, and quite rightly be re-imbursed for the costs involved, to come to Dublin for a 3 hour meeting and the last time he got to Dublin he found that the meeting had been cancelled. So what about the cost/benefit of greater electronic communication (last years post bill for Church House was ) about some limited form of video conferencing? The time we spend exhausting our clergy and laity (that's allowing for those who can spare the time) in travelling to and attending at endless meetings is only mighty! Sometime ask your Bishop or Archdeacon to show you his diary and you'll see what I mean about endless meetings! My other concern is that the present system precludes in many cases among the laity, some very talented people from being able to take part and contribute their specific skills and knowledge.

So far I haven't mentioned finance but clearly to make the changes that we've got to make, to support some of the exciting initiatives that are coming through, we'll have to make the funds available and that won't be easy and certainly not in the present climate. To do new things will mean stopping doing some of the things we've always done, that we're comfortable with, that we don't want to change. But we have got to change, and at a time when the total 'pot' is unlikely to get bigger or much bigger, then we've all got to accept the implications.

Let's just look, briefly at a few figures. The latest census figures for the South published by the Central Statistics office last month for the period 1991 to 2002 provide some interesting factual material on changes in religious practice in the South of Ireland. We can make a lot, if we want, of the 29.6% increase in those calling themselves Church of Ireland but it's significantly less of an increase than eg for the Presbyterian and Methodist churches and coming as it does largely because of immigration, is not reflected in equivalent church attendance and support. Of greater significance I suggest is the increase of over 100% in those who indicated that they had no religion and half of these being under 40. Similarly in Northern Ireland there is a decline in numbers of those claiming to be Church of Ireland and declining numbers in regular churchgoers. I don't wish to be unduly pessimistic, just realistic. The message is of a rapidly changing Irish society, and against these facts where do we really stand.

Let me conclude with a quotation.

‘ a dependence upon existing structures, cost of maintaining outmoded and uneconomic buildings, the maintenance of systems set up in different times, and inherent resistance to change bred from a defensive atmosphere, are some of the attitudes which are stifling the church’

Not my quotation, not 2004, but 25 years ago and from the report of the Proirities Committee, chaired then and still thankfully in the chair today, by the Archbishop of Armagh.

Your Grace, members of Synod,

In proposing to you today the report of the Representative Church Body for the past year may I strongly recommend that at some early stage you look at or relook at the report of 25 years ago, and especially Appendix C the Summary and see for yourself how far we've come ,but also how far we've still got to go.

Thank You.