

GENERAL SYNOD 2005

Board of Education NI

Seconded by the Reverend Canon Trevor Gillian, Clogher Diocese

Your Grace, no more Sunday school! no more Sunday school teachers! Such remarks may make interesting headlines but they wouldn't adequately reflect the thinking of the Board of Education (Northern Ireland). I'll return to this shortly.

In seconding the report of the Board of Education, I firstly want to make a few necessary comments on Educational Funding and then draw the Synod's attention to another issue, important and far-reaching in its significance for our people in the parishes.

There has been much debate recently in the media regarding the matter of funding for education. That debate was between an education minister who argued that there were real value increases in the amount of money going to education and Education & Library Boards who were forced to make cuts in services in order to balance their budgets. The general public is left wondering - just how can this be? The reality is that there have been real increases in funding in education, but a very large proportion of it has been taken up with salary increases and threshold payments for teachers. The Department of Education must be asked why it did not fully fund the additional salary costs it agreed with unions?

Education and Library Boards have also had to make cuts in provision due to other unforeseen factors— for example increasing rates and transport costs; we trust that those cuts will not have longer term effects. However another unplanned cost has arisen in delivering mainstream education to pupils with Special Educational Needs. The government's own legislation which promised so much to parents of children

with Special Needs has not been properly funded. It has simply been disingenuous of the government to respond to the rights of Special Needs children in law yet not adequately resource those needs in practice. We trust that the change of NIO minister will bring more compassion, foresight and understanding.

The Children's Ministry Research Project has been and continues to be a major item on the agenda of the NI Board and of the Children's Ministry Sub-group. But it concerns a matter which is surely of interest and importance to the whole Church of Ireland, What are the needs of children in the church family in the early 21 Century? How are we meeting these needs? Where are we failing our children and those who work and relate closely with them? What are the implications for training and resources? Why is it that existing models for children's ministry, especially in regard to Sunday school do not appear to be working as well as they used to? Questions of this type were behind the thinking of the NI Board as we set out to tackle this issue.

Anecdotal evidence alone that things were not all well was not sufficient. A properly funded and researched project should be undertaken, To this end we employed Dr Gareth Higgins, known to Synod as the 'man behind' the Hard Gospel report, to undertake a similar research project, although now confined to a representative sample of parishes across Northern Ireland.

Details of the methodology can be found in the Book of Reports, page 281 Here, suffice to say that to the best of our knowledge this is the first research of its kind to actually consult children and ask them what they think. Because the final report is extensive, the Board wished to make a condensed and popular form available to as wide an audience as possible. Called '*Children's Ministry in the Church of*

Ireland: A New Vision you will have received a copy today at Synod. Further copies are available for parishes to use as a discussion document.

Significant are the suggested points of action: those for the General Synod Board of Education (in both jurisdictions), for diocesan boards of education, for diocesan boards of religious education, for the parishes. There are implications for attitudes, practices, training and resources.

There are some things that the Board of Education would wish to further. Dioceses are strongly encouraged to re-awaken or establish where they do not already exist children's ministry working groups. The appointment of a Children's Ministry Officer may not be possible in every diocese, but with cross-diocesan co-operation and resourcing this is something worth pursuing; this ministry surely must be resourced at the very least at provincial level. If models for children's ministry are to change, diocesan based training and support is essential.

If I may be permitted a brief; personal appeal: we urgently need the Liturgical Advisory Committee to produce material for inter-generational worship that is both attractive and appropriate for use with children in church,

One possible starting point is to engage with those issues falling under the heading terminology and culture. This brings me back to my opening remarks. Contemporary approaches to children's ministry must acknowledge a major cultural shift in society from 'facts-based' instruction to something more akin to 'apprenticeship'. Traditional 'instructional' models, with terms such as 'teacher', 'superintendent', 'class' and 'school' no longer serve us well. The adage, 'Christianity is caught, not taught' expresses the nature of the dilemma. Not just knowledge and facts to be taught, but values to be imparted, attitudes and personality to be developed.

We can't dispense with the verb *teach* altogether, but we need to ask ourselves what are the best methods, what are the best approaches, what are the best resources (human and material) to ensure successful children's ministry?

In conclusion, I borrow and adapt a prayer from the prayer book: Almighty God, bless the homes and parishes of these children, and give such grace and wisdom to all who have the care of them, that by their words, methods, and good example they may teach them to know and love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Your Grace, I have pleasure in seconding the report of the Board of Education and commending it to synod.

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