

## **THE CHURCH IN SOCIETY COMMITTEE REPORT**

**Proposed by Dr Kenneth Milne- Dublin**

### **Embargoed until Delivery**

Your Grace,

I feel certain that many members will recall those past sessions of the General Synod when the hall was filled with floodlights and rolling cameras, and the Press gallery was crowded with expectant reporters as we awaited with palpable excitement the debate on the Role of the Church Committee, the title by which our predecessor was known. There was always a great buzz in the air, for the matters under discussion in those days in that report were, in the main, political, and sometimes very controversial.

A rather more placid atmosphere prevails today (though of course, with the General Synod, one never knows quite what to expect next). But in many ways we seem far removed from the heady days of the 1960s and '70s.

Yet, the content of the report which I now have the honour to propose is, I submit, in many ways as controversial as were the issues that were being debated a generation ago. Many of the most critical Issues facing society today are to be encountered in these pages, and not a few of them give rise to very considerable differences of opinion and arouse strong feelings of one kind or another, within and beyond the Church of Ireland.

Our committee's mode of operation is through sub-committees, or, more properly, working groups. Working-group is a more appropriate title than 'sub-committee', for we are, in a sense, study-groups, whose membership can change according to the expertise required for the particular topic on which they are deliberating at any one time. But, it should be added, these working-groups are not intended to be mere talking-shops, but are expected to produce documentation, sometimes for debate within the church, sometimes to make a contribution to public discourse.

The range of matters under scrutiny is very considerable, as members of the General Synod will see from the report. The working-group on 'Social justice and theology-Republic of Ireland' has produced a report on 'Alcohol in the life of young people' for circulation to the parishes and beyond (see p. 270), a publication that has proved so useful that it is being reprinted.

The 'Medical ethics, science and technology' group (p. 271) has worked in the area of stem-cell research, and keeps what it terms 'a watching brief' on developments on euthanasia/physician- assisted suicide and on in-vitro fertilisation. This working-group is hoping to be in a position to put forward well-informed comment when occasion demands.

Politics, particularly those affecting Northern Ireland, may not dominate the agenda of the Church in Society Committee to the extent that they did in the days of the former Role of the Church Committee. But politics continue to demand attention at a time of great uncertainty about the future governance of Northern Ireland. Likewise in the Republic, we have to be prepared to make a Church of Ireland contribution to ongoing discussion of constitutional change and law reform. These are among the issues that are re-shaping Irish society at an unparalleled rate.

I should like to go into rather more detail on matters relating to two working groups in particular, beginning with the Ecological and Environmental Sub-committee (pp 271-2). I have already said that we are not meant to be talking-shops, which is why this particular group has concentrated on the formulation of an eco-congregational scheme for churches. This is being done ecumenically, in partnership with other churches in Britain and Ireland. The objective is to promote a greater understanding of environmental issues in the parishes, and to provide guidelines for good environmental practice.

The European Affairs Working-group has, understandably, been preoccupied with the fate of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, which, we understand, will be put to the electorates of both the United Kingdom and Ireland in due course. We were invited to make a submission on the Constitutional Treaty to the National Forum on Europe, in Dublin, which we did in April, making it clear that we see it as our function as a church to enable people to identify the major Issues at stake in the Constitutional Treaty, and to do our best to clarify the pros and cons in each case. As chairman of the European Affairs Working- group I have, with Dr Adrian Empey, been attending meetings of the Forum, and of the Institute of European Affairs, both of which bodies have been dealing with the terms of the new treaty in considerable detail, and with much expert participation. We were also represented at a day seminar organised in Dublin 'by the Green Party, at which the main features of the Constitutional Treaty were rigorously examined by its defenders and its critics. We will shortly be meeting, at our invitation, with several MEPs, representing constituencies north and south, and the new Treaty will be among the issues before us. We have also been asked to meet with a body highly critical of aspects of the Treaty, especially the defence and security elements.

From time to time we are asked whether or not the Church of Ireland is pro-or anti-the Treaty. Our position as a working- group, certainly at present, is to say, as I indicated earlier, that we see it as our role to identify the salient parts of the treaty, particularly those with which a church should most definitely be concerned and to encourage informed debate on these areas.

The aforementioned issues comprise, it must surely be admitted, an enormous agenda for any voluntary group. Yet the Church of Ireland cannot abdicate from its twofold responsibility, to give expression to a Christian, perhaps sometimes an alternative, Christian voice, and also to contribute (a word I have used several times before) as Ireland, north and south seeks to find its own solutions to what frequently appear to be intractable problems for which, in a number of cases, there is no precedent. In this regard, I must tell the General Synod that such work by the various sub-groups of the committee as I have described has depended heavily on the support that we receive from Church of Ireland House, and the other group chairpersons and I would wish to acknowledge the commitment of those members of staff who have done so much to enable us to discharge our responsibilities.

In the hope that the members of the General Synod agree that the church ought to be active in making its views known at this time when, north and south we are experiencing such fundamental shifts in how the society around us is developing, I have pleasure.....