

THE COVENANT COUNCIL OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND AND METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND

Canon Adrian Empey, Secunder to the Report.

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

As secunder to the report, I would like to assure the members of the house that the members of the Covenant Council do not spend all their time splitting theological atoms. In so far as our activities bear any relation to nuclear physics, the name of the game is fusion rather than fission.

How to fuse the earnest aspirations of local Church of Ireland and Methodist congregations was one of the principal tasks we set ourselves in the course of the past year. The real challenge is how to convert high hopes and prayerful aspirations of congregations seeking to witness together to the mission of the church into practical, working relationships where possible problems are anticipated rather than discovered too late. Basically, it is the difference between being engaged to be married, and the real thing.

We have accordingly devoted a lot of time to designing frameworks for Local Covenant Partnerships [LCPs]. Put simply, our advice to intending partners is that Local Covenant Partnerships ought not to be taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God, duly considering the causes for which covenants are ordained.

The council has therefore endeavoured to provide wise and workable guidelines with a variety of potential partnerships in mind, recognising that one size will not fit all. The areas envisaged include single congregations partnerships, congregations in covenanted partnerships, shared building partnerships, chaplaincy partnerships and so forth. In order to underpin such enterprises, it is recommended that there should always be a written agreement by the participating churches, so that the partners know exactly what is agreed to and how it is to be implemented and by whom. It is no less important that each participating church should seek to have this agreement authorized by their respective churches to ensure that the commitments entered into are in line with the structures and disciplines of their church authorities. Finally, such partnerships, having such formal recognition by their diocese or district, should liaise with the Covenant Council – so that we can both learn from their experience and be a resource. In the same way, it is essential that in each diocese or district there should be some person with a specific brief who will both encourage such partnerships and seek to facilitate them, reporting back to the diocesan synod every year. We see such a person, or facilitator, as exercising a key role as link person.

The council recognises that there are many issues that will need to be thought carefully through in an age where responsibilities and procedures are regarded not only as a safeguard in case of litigation, but also as evidence of good governance. It is better to get

things right at the beginning, and not to have to learn the hard way. That said, I do not think that forever waiting to get things right is always the wisest council. The fact of the matter is that local partnerships have existed for a number of years without any of these safeguards, so that long delays will only increase the opportunities for serious setbacks occurring. To dither indefinitely is a policy that ultimately carries far more risk..

Finally, we would like to draw attention to the fact that we are uncertain as to what is happening to the Anglican-Methodist International Commission, which seems to have been in abeyance since the last Lambeth Conference. It is enormously important that our activities should be consistent with international accords between our churches. We have therefore written to Canon Kearon, Secretary General of the Anglican Consultative Council, to clarify the position in regard to the International Commission.