

CHURCH OF IRELAND COUNCIL FOR MISSION:

Proposer: Rev Patrick Comerford (Dublin and Glendalough)

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Your grace,

It gives me great pleasure to propose and to present the report of the Church of Ireland Council for Mission.

Many of you can breathe a sigh of relief. This is one of the shortest reports in the Book of Reports this year. The first page, page 325, is a list of names; the last page, page 328, is an appendix and is not open to debate in this synod. And so, in effect, this is merely a two-page report.

But brevity and poverty are not the same. This short report is full of riches. The remit and operation of the new council is not a boring list of tasks or priorities. It is a manifesto, a manifesto for the mission of the Church of Ireland, and it can apply as much to your diocese and parish as it can to the Council for Mission.

Those of you who were at “mpower” in Armagh last month will know that the Church of Ireland is an exceptionally rich when it comes to the commitment of our members, our parishes and our dioceses to mission, both at home and overseas.

Over 70 delegates came from overseas, and over 14 countries were represented at the conference.

Over 800 people took part in the main worship service in Armagh on Thursday night ... it lasted almost three hours, but the only complaint I heard was that it could have gone on longer.

Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, Armagh, was packed the following evening for the closing Communion or Eucharist. And solemnity, joy, celebration and empowerment all came together as the congregation burst out in spontaneous singing just before the administration of the Holy Communion.

Yes, the Church of Ireland is alive. Yes, the Anglican Communion is alive. And yes, there is a real sense of partnership in our mission task. Although CMS organised “mpower”, most of the mission societies working in the Church of Ireland were present in some way or another – including CPAS, the Mother’s Union, the Church Army, SAMS, the Dublin University missions and the Leprosy Mission.

And we realised together what was being said at General Synod last year: that mission is no longer one-way traffic, from here to there, from us to them. It is about both giving and receiving, but about much, much more. It is from us to them, it is from them to us, but it is already from them to them, and it must also become here-to-here, mission from us to us.

One of the speakers wisely reminded us that when we are engaged in mission we cannot give what we do not own. We cannot engage in mission, working with refugees in Uganda or Sudan, without being concerned about refugees at home. We cannot engage in Muslim-Christian dialogue in Cairo and Alexandria if we are not committed to it in Dublin and Armagh.

If you have any lingering images of mission being about pith helmets, safari suits and dug-out canoes then you have missed out on the life-and-death issues that were being discussed in the workshops in Armagh, and that I know are on the agenda of all the mission agencies and societies: refugees, asylum seekers, the disempowerment of women, “ethnic cleansing” and wars fuelled by racism and religious hatred, the spread of AIDS, and the failure of all our governments to live up the commitments in the Millennium Development Goals.

Canon Tim Dakin of CMS in Britain was so right when he said it was indictment of all our churches that the Millennium Development Goals had not been drafted and put forward by the Churches. But I also think it is an indictment of us, all of us, that our Governments have escaped lightly when it comes to the political costs of renegeing on those commitments. The Irish Government’s decision not to meet its own target of spending 0.7% of national wealth on overseas development aid by 2007 has been deeply disappointing for all the mission and development agencies in the Republic and threatens to significantly undermine Ireland’s credibility as a donor and global player on international affairs. And the practical implications are life-threatening if you consider that one out of every two children in the world lives in poverty.

And so, we cannot separate our concerns for mission overseas from our concerns for mission at home. You cannot be concerned about the people we work in partnership with in mission without worrying about how government policies here can change their lives, for good or ill.

I was looking over some old files in my offices last week, and came across letters that reminded me that the first discussions about merging the former Council for the Church Overseas and the Council for Mission in Ireland took place in General Synod ten years ago in 1995.

There was some understandable resistance to those proposals. But the merger of those two former mission councils has taken place, and this report shows that merger has taken place successfully.

Already we have had a mission-focussed discussion of The Hard Gospel report which was referred to the council by the Sectarian Education Project Committee. The mission issues it raises include:

- Dealing with ethnic difference and asylum seekers;
- Relations with other churches and inter-church activities;
- Our attitudes to other world religions;
- Welcoming and involving new members and becoming aware of the difficulties and opportunities provided by the boundaries between believers and non-believers;
- Responding to society in general;
- And training and resourcing the clergy.

All of these are pressing issues for the Church of Ireland to face in the 21st century and to face honestly as a church that has shown itself in Armagh to be a church committed to mission, and committed to a mission that is multitracked.

In a closing address to the “mpower” conference, my colleague Colin Corbridge, “Spike”, referred to his favourite author, Paolo Coelho, who says that the safest place for a boat is in the

harbour. But, he points out, boats are not built to stay in the harbour ... they are built to go out into sea

The theologian Emil Brunner once said: "As a fire exists by burning so the Church exists by mission; if there is no burning there is no fire; if there is no mission there is no Church."

After Armagh, I am convinced that the Church of Ireland is ready to set itself on fire for mission.

Or, to return to that image from Paolo Coelho, I am sure our most active and committed members, our parishes and our dioceses are no longer happy to see the Church of Ireland as a boat safely tied up in the harbour. They are willing to take the risks involved as we sail out in mission into the future.

Bringing the two former mission councils together was an important move in preparing us for that. The opportunities are there. There is a great world out there beyond the horizons of our own parishes. And, having felt the mood at Armagh, I know our parishioners want to sail out past those horizons.

Come on board. Let's set sail.

Mark Twain once said: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

Don't be disappointed in twenty years from now. Seize the opportunity now to engage and empower your parishioners, your parishes and your dioceses in mission. The new Council for Mission is committed to helping you to do that, to achieve that. Explore! Dream! Discover!

[ends]