

## **GENERAL SYNOD 2005**

### **REPORT OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE – SECONDED BY MRS J LEIGHTON, DIOCESE OF ARMAGH**

#### **EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

Your Grace, Members of Synod

In seconding the Report of the Standing Committee I would like first of all to draw your attention to the reference on page 155 concerning the Synodical Reform Working Group. Those who have noted that the Group has been disbanded may have had their appetites whetted enough to read Appendix Q on page 250.

In 1998, following a motion proposed by the then Canons Paul Colton and Michael Burrows, the Standing Committee appointed the first Synodical Structures Working Group to examine the composition of the General Synod. In 2001, after considerable research, the Group sought to bring before Synod a Bill to amend Chapter I of the Constitution effectively reducing the size of the General Synod to what might have been considered a more representative and manageable body with members no longer elected by a majority vote but by proportional representation. This, the Group felt, accurately reflected the consensus of opinion that change was necessary. However, the Synod voted not to accept the Bill and the Standing Committee was tasked with re-examining the position with a view to placing revised proposals before Synod during the triennium ending in 2005.

Another Working Group was appointed - the Synodical Reform Working Group - part of whose brief was to "consult widely, as appropriate, and report to the Standing Committee in March 2003 on the reform of the General Synod". Members of Standing Committee were invited to submit suggestions and comments on which issues should be addressed and anyone who read the Group's report in the 2003 Book of Reports will appreciate the extent of its deliberations.

In noting that there was general agreement that a revision of Synodical structures was necessary, the Working Group felt that the most controversial component of such a review was the question of diocesan representation and overall membership of the General Synod and so the Group recommended three models for submission to the Standing Committee, each of which would maintain the number of representatives at roughly the same level as it is at present, i.e. 648

The three models were based on the following :

1. Church population in each diocese.
2. The number of cures in each diocese.
3. The number of cures and other licensed clergy in each diocese.

In March 2004 the Group met with Diocesan Secretaries to ascertain whether comparable statistics could be obtained across the dioceses for model one, i.e. that based on Church of Ireland population. However, it quickly became evident that such varying criteria was employed in each diocese to define "population" it would be impossible to reach a consensus.

Thus, at last year's General Synod members had the opportunity to consider altering our Synodical structures based on either the number of cures in each diocese, or the number of cures and other licensed clergy in each diocese. Taking into account the apparent preference for a representation based on the number of cures only, the Working Group subsequently developed a model so based, the analysis of which can be found on page 252. In addition the Group felt that a small number of key personnel should be elected ex officio members, with full voting rights.

These proposals were presented to Standing Committee in January 2005 with the intention that a Bill to amend Chapter 1 of the Constitution be submitted to this year's General Synod. Despite a lengthy discussion members of the Standing Committee were unable to reach agreement on whether the proposed model should be recommended and as a result it was decided that without sufficient support the proposal could not be brought forward to Synod.

Not surprisingly, the Working Group consequently decided that it had explored every possible avenue in its efforts to deal with the thorny issue of Synodical reform and at its meeting in March 2005 the Standing Committee acceded to the Group's request that it be disbanded.

Therefore, since 1998 when the Standing Committee appointed the first Synodical Structures Working Group, we have debated the issues at length in this House, encouraged the utilisation of the time and resources of no less than three working groups, the two canons who started it all have been propelled to the higher echelons of Bishop and Dean respectively, and we now find ourselves back at square one!

#### THE HARD GOSPEL PROGRAMME

The Hard Gospel Report challenged us all, in various ways, to consider how we "deal with differences" and in particular with sectarianism within our society.

From our responses to the questions asked it became evident that illustrations of sectarianism as most of us have been educated to understand it in fact take many forms - ethnic, cultural, sexual, even bullying in the school playground.

However, the Report did not attempt to tell us how we might make a difference by undergoing a process of change within ourselves, our parishes, our dioceses and as a Church.

The Hard Gospel Programme proposes to do just that in helping to transform attitudes and contribute fully to the evolution of change which is happening within Ireland. As you will note from pages 255 - 260 an extensive programme is planned over the next three years with the employment of three fulltime staff, part time administrative assistance and a budget in the region of £560,00 over the three year period. It is hoped that the International Fund for Ireland will provide a significant percentage of this amount but that will be dependent on the allocation of matching funding from Church of Ireland and other resources.

It is envisaged that the Hard Gospel Programme will engage with both the structure of central organisation in relation to the implementation of policy and ministry and with clergy and laity at diocesan and parish levels. By so doing it aims to develop and promote policies and practices which will equip and enable the Church of Ireland in a rapidly changing country to relate positively with understanding and tolerance to those who may have different beliefs and cultures.

#### THE PRIORITIES FUND

As we heard earlier this afternoon, the Priorities Fund is celebrating it's silver anniversary and I would congratulate those involved in the excellent presentation outlining the history of the Fund and its work. During the past 25 years the Fund has provided much needed and very much appreciated financial support to many parishes throughout the Church of Ireland. I know that in my Diocese of Armagh there are a number of parishes who would have found it extremely difficult to meet the financial obligations of their individual projects without this assistance and on behalf of those parishes I would thank the PF Committee for its generosity. In contributing to the Priorities Fund we are supporting ourselves and each other within the Church of Ireland and while our history of charitable giving to missions is to be admired it is worth remembering that amongst the many individual parochial projects that the Priorities Fund supports it also provides considerable grant aid towards the training of students both for the stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministry, the growth and expansion of youth work throughout the Church of Ireland and, of particular relevance in Northern Ireland, to the promotion of outreach and reconciliation projects which aim to re-educate and facilitate differing communities who are striving to find common ground and live together in peace. It is a worthy Fund.

## REVIEW OF THE IRISH CONSTITUTION RELATING TO THE FAMILY

Considerable press coverage has been devoted recently to a meeting with the All Party Oireachtas Committee in relation to Articles 40.3, 41 and 42.5 of the Irish Constitution on the Family. This followed on from the Church of Ireland's written submission to the Committee which can be found on pages 247 - 249 of the Book of Reports.

The All-Party Committee was established in October 1997 to undertake a full review of the Constitution and the aforementioned Articles deal with the rights and protection of the Family as *"the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State"*. But what constitutes a family in today's world? Is it confined to a father, mother and children living together within the union of marriage? I think not.....

The UN definition of a family is *"any combination of two or more persons who are bound together by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibility for, inter alia, the care and maintenance of group members, the addition of new members through procreation or adoption, the socialisation of children and the social control of members"*.

Consider for a moment this definition - "ties of mutual consent, birth, adoption or placement..... assuming the responsibility for the care and maintenance of group members" - within those words we can recognise so many units existing in today's society and which, surely, should be included in the description of "family" - yes, the so-called conventional and, to some, the acceptable family created within marriage - but what about those family units not bound together by marriage - the single parent bringing up children on his or her own either as a result of divorce or, in cases of many single mothers, never having been married; siblings living together who may have no "family" besides each other - many of us from rural areas know of an elderly brother and sister who have lived together all their lives, often working the home farm; a middle-aged nephew or niece caring for their elderly relative; a couple living together, each with children from a former marriage; and, like it or not, the same-sex couple who are in a committed and long-term relationship? This is the reality of our society. This is how people live in the real world. Can it really be claimed that these should not be regarded as valid family units?

I have no doubt that we will hear many arguments based on the scriptures defending marriage as the ultimate vehicle - the optimum context - within which a family exists. So it is and it must be safeguarded as such. Do not misunderstand - the Church of Ireland's doctrinal position on the sanctity of marriage has not changed and the submission to the Oireachtas is not signifying

approval for the formal blessing or otherwise of same-sex unions although there are those who mischievously would attempt to put that slant on it. What the submission is pointing out is that we should not ignore the many types of domestic situation within which people today live and regard as their family. To do so surely risks polarising significant sections of our communities and does not demonstrate Christian tolerance and understanding. Our concern is to encourage a compassionate and protective attitude on the part of the State to all those who require that security. We like to think of ourselves as being an inclusive Church so by seeking to persuade the Review Body to make provision for the constitutional rights of those who are not protected by marriage we are striving to act as an inclusive Church.

In addition to suggesting that the definition of the Family ought to be broadened the Committee is requested to give urgent consideration to the implementation of changes in the current system of dealing with family law cases which by their very nature are distressful for those most closely involved and in cases of extreme sensitivity, especially where there may be issues of child protection, the welfare of the children must be of paramount importance. It is recommended that there should be within the Constitution "the express guarantee.....of the rights of the child". This further demonstrates the Church's desire to ensure that there must be cognisance of the need to safeguard those who are most vulnerable.

I think it is worth quoting part of the final paragraph of our submission to the Oireachtas Committee:

*" In all of this we seek to set out the position of the Church of Ireland; to suggest that there areas of de facto family life and domestic arrangements which fall outside the assumptions of marriage-cum-family and these areas are entitled to appropriate legal protection; to articulate our concern that the civil society of which members of the Church of Ireland are part deal fairly in its legal provision with those whose domesticities fall without as well as within our understanding of the family. Society is broader than our definitions and provision for our members but we feel that the inclusive spirit of the Church of Ireland can and does contribute to the good of our society."*

Your Grace, I have much pleasure in seconding the Report of the Standing Committee