Critical Church Structures in the 1970s period - the Role of the Church and Priorities Committees

By David Bird

During the 1970s, two central Church committees played a most important role in steering the Church of Ireland through this most challenging of times. The Role of the Church Committee was originally formed in 1969, and thereafter gradually and steadily established itself as being able to distil the various views of its members from widely different backgrounds and provide the considered Church of Ireland viewpoint on the political, social and economic issues of the day. The depth and breadth of its work can be seen in the report to general Synod in 1980. All of its work was done by a voluntary committee. An official secretary/researcher, Jim McGaffin, was not appointed until 1980.

The second very important committee was the Priorities Committee established in May 1977, under the chairmanship of the bishop of Derry, the Rt Revd Dr R.H.A. Eames. As the financial demands on the funds available to the Representative Church Body increased, the Priorities Committee was established to ‘give urgent consideration of the priorities involved in the stewardship of the Church’s material resources’.

The Gazette was of the opinion that in order to find the money necessary for increasing ‘religious purposes’, the Committee would have to ‘go to the country’. And this is what happened. The new monies raised by the Priorities Fund allowed a planned approach to the financing of church projects at local and national levels. Today grants are allocated under a number of headings: Ministry; Retirement; Education; Outreach Initiatives and Innovative Ministry in a Rural Context. In 2018, over €700,000 was disbursed.

When appointed to the House of Bishops, in June 1975, Bishop Eames became the Church’s youngest bishop since Disestablishment in 1870. From the very start of his episcopate, he made a significant contribution to building bridges and reconciliation. The Gazette report covering his enthronement in St Columb’s cathedral, Derry, captured his determination to ‘Take a Risk in Seeking Peace’ and building relationships with other Church leaders, including the Most Revd Edward Daly, Roman Catholic Bishop of Derry, as the image below shows (Church of Ireland Gazette, 4 July 1975).
Take a risk in seeking peace —

Bishop of Derry and Raphoe

Right Rev. Dr. Edward Tom McAreavey, Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, has described the Church of Ireland as the church of the future, as it continues to play a key role in promoting peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. In a landmark decision, the Church has moved towards full acceptance of gay and lesbian members, setting a precedent for other churches.

The Church of Ireland, in a significant step forward, has lifted its ban on same-sex marriages. This decision, announced by Dr. McAreavey, has been warmly welcomed by many, including the Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. The move is seen as a symbol of the Church's commitment to equality and justice.

Speaking at a press conference, Dr. McAreavey said: "This is a momentous occasion for the Church of Ireland. We believe in the dignity and humanity of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. We are committed to being a church that welcomes everyone, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation."

The decision has been hailed as a landmark in the Church's history, with many seeing it as a step towards full acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. However, not everyone has welcomed the move, with some expressing concerns about the Church's relationship with the Anglican Communion.

Dr. McAreavey acknowledged these concerns, saying: "We understand that this decision may not be popular with some. We respect their views, but we cannot compromise on our commitment to human rights and equality."

The decision comes as the Church faces challenges on multiple fronts, including ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland and the wider issue of same-sex marriage. Dr. McAreavey said: "We are committed to working towards a peaceful, united Ireland. This decision is one small step towards that goal."

The Church of Ireland is one of the most important Churches in Northern Ireland, with a significant influence on the society. Many are watching to see how this decision will be received and how it will impact the Church's future.