

**GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND
DUBLIN 2010**

The Priority of Mission in the Church of God

Members of the General Synod,

Those of you with memories long enough may have a sense that the General Synod of 2010 is a homecoming. Across the bridge stands the old Synod Hall, across the road, the Lord Edward. Within the precincts of both – officially and unofficially - the work of the General Synod was conducted for many years. In those days the levels of debate were notably high, the levels of comfort comparatively low. Nevertheless, this is a homecoming and if the arrangements for this synod are deemed a success we shall meet here every second year for years to come. I, therefore, wish to thank the Dean and Chapter, the Board of Christ Church Cathedral and the staff of the cathedral for opening their doors and their hearts to us. I also want to thank the RCB staff for putting in hand this major experiment which, as the years go by, will save the Representative Church Body thousands of Euro. Much of the technology you see around you today represents a significant investment in the future.

It may also seem a little like a homecoming this evening when we meet in the National Cathedral and Collegiate Church of St Patrick for our General Synod Eucharist. Time was when St Patrick's hosted a pre-Synod service every year on the evening before the opening of the General Synod. I am grateful to the Dean and Chapter of St Patrick's for facilitating us as in past years. The proximity of this cathedral to St Patrick's Cathedral should ensure that we can make our way down the hill in good time for the start of the service this evening at 7.00pm.

There is an important resonance conveyed by our meeting in this cathedral church. A synod is a spiritual assembly. Yes it is a parliament wherein the affairs of the Church and its governance are adjudicated, but it is more than that. It is an occasion upon which to examine our participation in the mission of God. The conversations of a synod, the determinations of a synod, should be spiritual conversations and determinations about the mission of God. The mission of God is the primary purpose and the primary context of our meeting as it is, indeed, the primary purpose and primary reason for the existence of the Church itself.

There is always, however, a secondary context and the secondary context is the current state and circumstances of the world and of our national life. We meet in troubled and uncertain times with one over-riding issue surpassing all others – the state of the economy and the impact of serious recession on the lives and life chances of ordinary people. The Church of Ireland's own financial position has been gravely affected, as we shall see later in this synod, but that is of relatively limited significance when compared with the demoralizing impact of recession on vulnerable folk.

These are people whom our Lord would have us reach out to with a special care. For that we shall require renewal in our commitment to the mission of God, hence the title of this address 'The Priority of Mission in the Church of God'.

The Church of God – the Body of Christ – is one of the instruments of God's mission in the world. Wherever we are called upon to minister, the Church must serially re-evangelize the people among whom she serves. In the past few years the Church of Ireland Council for Mission has deliberated on the broad theme of 'mission shaped Church'. The objectives for 2009 were set out as follows:

- To provoke members of the Church of Ireland, at every level, to think what it means to be 'mission shaped' in Ireland today...
- To facilitate the employment of new forms and patterns of ministry conducive to mission...
- To encourage local churches to think strategically about mission...

and

- To enable already existing information to be used for mission purposes.

The Council for Mission has rightly identified the need for the People of God, especially as represented in the institutional church, to recognize the absolute priority of mission as the hallmark of the life of the Christian and the Christian Church, and, especially, to understand that simply relying upon doing what we have always done and being inward looking is not adequate as society changes. Therefore we need a broader and deeper understanding of contemporary mission. For that I turn to three of the mission agencies most closely associated with the Church of Ireland.

One of the pitfalls inherent in hiving off the mission agencies from the mainstream life of the Church is that we create a false dichotomy. We look upon mission as a special activity separate from normal church life and lose that outward looking orientation that properly belongs to the Church. The Church is not only holy and catholic; it is also commanded to be apostolic. Perhaps the mission agencies can help us restore the vision of apostolicity.

Therefore, I turn to 'The Church Mission Society, Ireland'; 'The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Ireland'; and 'The Church Army'. Here is what each says about its own understanding and vision of mission.

- CMSI says this:

CMS Ireland works in partnership with the Church to share the Gospel throughout the world in word and deed ... we are working to see our world transformed by the message and love of Christ. We ... work in 14 countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. Through a network of Global Partners ... we seek to support and nurture the Church, as it plays its part in God's mission... This means that the sending and receiving of people, the sharing of resources, a commitment to prayer and encouraging opportunities for discipleship form the core of what we do...

CMSI is running a road show this very month entitled 'God's Big 2: living a life of love'. The road show focuses upon the central command of our Lord 'to Love God and to Love Others'.

- USPGI says this:

Mission begins and ends with the Triune God. It is God's activity from creation until the coming together of all things in Christ. It is seen most clearly in the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience we see the Holy Spirit at work, calling, liberating and transforming the People of God.

Communion is at the heart of God, the very life of the Trinity. God yearns to draw each one of us into this communion with him... Communion is God's gift to the Church. We respond in worship, most of all when this communion is made real in the Eucharist... Communion is God's will and desire for all humanity and the whole of creation. Mission is, therefore, 'holistic', responding to all of God's liberating activity so that people may 'grow spiritually, thrive physically, and have a voice in an unjust world'.

It involves Evangelization, Pastoral Care, Education and Healthcare, the struggle for Justice and Peace, and the care of Creation (the five marks of mission identified by the Anglican Communion).

- The Church Army says:

We are about sharing faith through words and actions to transform lives by making Jesus famous. Our focus is on the 7 out of 10 people who have little or no meaningful contact with the church. We bring hope, help people to live life to the full and transform lives and communities with the good news of the Gospel.

Although differently expressed and with different emphases, all three long established mission agencies speak the same language of mission. I don't know if even the mission agencies realize how much they have in common – they themselves may wish to consider if there might not be synergies they could exploit by closer collaboration.

Be that as it may, if I were to try to encapsulate in a single paragraph the vision of mission shared by the three agencies it might read: 'The work of the Church in participating in the mission of God involves faithfulness to God expressed in the transformation of lives and communities through the deepening of communion, love and humble service. Genuine evangelization will be effected primarily through service, humility, trust, advocacy and justice, informed by the scriptures and with the confident proclamation of the authentic Word of Life in its wholesome entirety.'

The context of serial re-evangelization will take account of the peculiar circumstances of the present day and in Ireland we minister in circumstances uniquely our own:

- circumstances of political and social division: therefore we must be apostles of peace and justice;

- circumstances of denominational and religious diversity: therefore we must be apostles of respectful restraint and gracious dialogue;
- circumstances of recession, fear, rising unemployment and renewed poverty: therefore we must be apostles of generous care and a socially responsible morality.
- We minister among highly educated and sophisticated people: therefore we must be the apostles of learned simplicity but never of the simplistic.
- We minister in an environment, partly of our own making, in which religion is seen as discredited and irrelevant, faith is dismissed, worship is ignored and religious culture is no longer thrilling: therefore we must be apostles of joy and fulfillment, not by turning worship into entertainment but with the recognition that by worshipping and serving with integrity we may be serving angels, for God writes off no one.

These are our circumstances. The challenge to us is not to lament our circumstances but to transform them. Evangelization is the work of transformation. The role of the Church, in good times and in bad, is to stand alongside those who are finding it hardest to cope, whatever their circumstances; to exhibit in practical and personal ways the loving concern of God for all people but especially for the vulnerable; and to be a beacon of hope to the living, for nothing is more spiritually, socially and physically restorative than love and hope. We have to shape our life and institutions at all levels to reflect these priorities. We need to be less concerned about defending the institution and more concerned about enhancing the lives of people.

In the parishes, evangelization and thus transformation is rooted in, but not confined to pastoral care: clergy having time and spending time with their people and others who come to them for help; clergy enabling liturgical worship to be attractive and accessible; clergy standing beside the people of their communities in life's difficulties. But let us not fall into the trap of assuming that all pastoral, ministerial and missional endeavour is reserved to the clergy. It is the whole People of God, the Body of Christ, present in every parish, which is called through baptism to share in the mission of God. The huge strength of the complementary gifts of men and women in community far exceeds the capacity of individual clergy to be the sole agents of mission.

The parish is the church in microcosm. The Anglican tradition has held that the 'local Church' is not the parish but the diocese. The dioceses respond to God both independently – determining local priorities – and corporately – as components of a greater, national, whole: the Church of Ireland. At central level in the life of the Church of Ireland, therefore, through Boards, Commissions and Committees the dioceses work together to support and resource the work of mission in the parishes and to respond centrally to those wider responsibilities that are both global and local.

The mission agencies have shown us that mission begins when we meet people at their point of need: theology and doctrine come some way after compassion when it comes to introducing people to Christ. Therefore, in renewing the Church of God in mission we have consciously to develop ministries of compassion – not least in recession hit Ireland.

Ministries of compassion can be resourced by the centre but are best delivered in the parishes and dioceses by committed lay people with the professional and relational skills for the task. The record of organizations like Christians against Poverty is exemplary in this regard. The work of Protestant Aid is a more local expression of compassion within the Republic. The example of the Parish of Willowfield in the Diocese of Down demonstrates a grass roots approach to community building and compassion which many parishes could emulate. Here, as elsewhere, mission is the operation of love and hope through the actions of people of faith. We have to make it a priority to hold that vision in order to be a ‘mission shaped church’.

In order to be that ‘mission shaped church’ we need to reshape not who we are but what we do. Credibility comes through integrity; integrity is only discernible when we live what we believe and live to make a difference. We shall be judged not so much on the basis of the comment we make – talk can be very cheap – we shall be judged on the difference we make, and if, in order to make a difference, we have to sweep away what hinders us, let not any deficit in courage stand in our way.

It is right that at this synod we should address the way in which we shape our Church’s life going forward. It is also right in all circumstances, but especially the current circumstances of financial stringency, that we should ensure that neither resources of finance nor resources of effort are wasted.

Sometimes, in the history of the Church we have been confronted by external forces that became the drivers of change. Often, with the benefit of hindsight, one may recognize, hidden amongst the drivers of change, the handiwork of the Holy Spirit – the driving wind, the *ruach*, of God.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in all that has led us to restore to lay people their rightful place in the exercise of innumerable ministerial functions within the life of the Church. Reader Ministry in the Church of Ireland has just celebrated its centenary; specialized Youth Ministry is now an accepted part of parish life; Lay Pastoral Ministry in all its multiform variety is gaining wider and wider acceptance. We have emerged from an era of clerical dominance to one in which ministry is seen as a partnership: the work of the whole Body of Christ.

Now we are confronted with fresh challenges which require us once more to accommodate change because the financial resources of the Church of Ireland have been greatly reduced by the recession. I therefore want to offer a broad brush description of the financial structure of the funds managed by the Representative Body and how the free funds have been affected in the present crisis.

The total assets managed by the RB at the end of 2009 were valued at almost €448m. That is a very large sum and it is broken down into the following holdings:

- The Clergy Pension Fund owns about €97m
- The parishes and dioceses own about €205m
- Which leaves the RCB itself owning around €146m

The total income from all of those funds in 2009 was around €20.9m. That still looks like a vast sum but

- €4.8m of that belongs to the Clergy Pension Fund
- €9.9m belongs to the parishes and dioceses
- and only €6.166m of that income belongs to the RCB.

So, what does the RCB spend that €6.166m on?

- It spends €2.09m on running Church House, the RCB Library and committee travel costs.
- It spends a further €23K on Finance and other costs, including professional fees, audit and actuarially calculated pension finance costs.
- This leaves c€4.8m to be spent on allocations. This is the totality of the central funds which the Church of Ireland has available for things such as the costs of the episcopacy, theological training, and budgetary requests from the Standing Committee for the work of boards and committees.

In 2009, had it not been for unexpended allocations of €338K and subsidies from other funds of €275K there would have been a deficit around €1.3m, despite an across the board cut of 20% in requests for funding by the Standing Committee. As it is, the deficit in 2009 remains at c€750K which was met out of the Allocations Reserve – a ‘rainy day fund’ built up over the past few years. If this deficit is not addressed the ‘rainy day fund’ will disappear within three or four years.

The most dramatic, and for me the darkest implication of the financial situation is the imperative to reduce staffing levels in Church of Ireland House. The pain of the economic recession, as always, is borne by employees.

In circumstances such as these we need to learn to work smarter. We cannot afford to be profligate, we never could, but when times were good, we slipped into a mindset of taking on more and more tasks. We allowed ourselves to pursue every pet project and convened ever more committees. In future we need to be more purposeful, to order our priorities more carefully, to cut costs yet achieve more. I say ‘achieve more’ not ‘do more’ for the result of trying to do too much is that we achieve too little.

The Mission Statement issued by the House of Bishops and entitled Growth, Unity, Service could become a template for the work at central Church level to be focused on mission and setting the mission agenda. I believe that we should re-shape our work

programmes to reflect our understanding of the Triune shape of God's mission. We have to make considered choices. We have neither the human nor the financial resources to do everything. Commitment to too many endeavours is a barrier to the mission of God. We must shape our endeavours in conformity with God's mission and our commitment to transformation through evangelization.

In pursuit of that goal the bishops have presented the Standing Committee with exploratory proposals concerning the way we work at central church level organized around divisions which would encompass 'Worship and Spiritual Growth', 'Unity and Dialogue' and 'Living God's Kingdom and Serving the World'.

We might even consider adapting the agenda of the General Synod so that the work of each division is considered on a sequential basis in succeeding years of each triennium, providing for more focused discussion of closely related topics.

These proposals are intended, first and foremost, to challenge mindsets. The purpose is to substitute for the existing pattern of committees that have sprung up 'ad hoc' a new structure with a consciously strategic and mission oriented approach. Committees ought not to have, hard wired into them, the characteristics of eternity. We should seize the opportunity offered by the evils of the time, mindful of that wisdom which declares, 'never waste a recession!'

In terms of the global recession, the people of this island, north and south are confronted by quantitatively different but qualitatively similar circumstances.

The consequences of recession are devastating for those forced into unemployment or faced with the collapse of their companies. I recently received a letter from a GP. He described what he encounters in his consulting rooms as a result of families stressed to the limit by pressure from their banks: decent folk, pillars of the local community, reduced to tears. That GP's observations are more than supported by the statistics of suicide in both jurisdictions.

I have no special knowledge of banking practice except the experience of being a member of a single income family throughout my working life of 45 years. I know what it is to bump along the bottom and to have to depend on an understanding bank manager in a crisis situation. I know what it means to enjoy the generosity of family and the understanding of friends. What concerns me now is the extent to which things have changed.

The effects of the restriction in bank lending have been disastrous for small and medium sized businesses, especially in the construction sector, and, consequently, for those made unemployed as businesses contract. Many employers have been forced to the wall; one long established firm I know has laid off 60% of its workforce, others have ceased trading altogether; punitive rates of interest, in some cases more than 5% above LIBOR, are being demanded; banks are reducing overdraft facilities; asset rich but cash poor businesses, often described by the banks themselves as their core customers, are being

starved of the cash required to enable them to trade, yet these same small and medium sized businesses are the backbone of the local economy

Time was when banks were either investment partnerships or retail banks. Then, starting with Salomon Brothers in the United States in 1981, partnerships were floated as corporations, transferring the risks to shareholders rather than the partners and employees, and blurring the distinctions between two very different types of activity. At this point the strength of the capitalist system in collectivizing the sharing of risk became, it could be argued, a weakness. As the financial sector sought to create more high risk credit and to invent products to spread the risk of investment among an ever widening pool of shareholders and clients, many people became involved in this area of the economy without being fully aware of the risk that they carried.

Scandalously, the people who paid the price for the bond market gambling that brought down the financial system were the tax payers. The people who walked away virtually unscathed, in some cases much richer, were the bankers and traders who invented the products and the system. As Michael Lewis puts it in his colourful expose entitled 'The Big Short', 'By early 2009 the risks and losses associated with more than a trillion dollars' worth of bad investments were transferred from big Wall Street firms to the US taxpayer.' And, it is necessary for us to add, to the UK and Irish tax payers as well.

One might have expected that, liquidity having been pumped into the banks to enable them to begin lending again in the real economy, viable business and industry would have found their liquidity requirements readily met by banks anxious to ensure the future for their clients. This has not been a universal experience.

From having a *raison d'être* founded on providing a mechanism for raising capital for business and industry, too much of the focus in the financial services sector has been on making extraordinary profits on complex investment products where even bankers themselves seem not to understand the dimension of risk. Is it too late to turn back the clock and remove from working people and businesses - and indeed from the retail banking industry - the risk of the billion dollar gambles of the bond markets? If it is, other types of institutions must be created to return society generally and retail banking in particular to a less vulnerable place.

We require a reassertion of the key understanding that the first obligation of the retail banks is to the customer and that the true interests of shareholders are best served by implementing customer satisfaction. Part of that banking obligation to the customer involves ensuring that credit is available to keep business alive for, without business, wealth creation ceases and employment collapses. The other part involves preventing the customer from accessing more credit than s/he can service – the kind of discretion banks used to exercise with skill and compassion.

Banks are a part of our social system and integral to the lives of ordinary people and the businesses where they work. Banks have obligations and responsibilities proportionate to the significance of their public role and function. That public role and function is to

facilitate financial flows. Banks and financial institutions are not themselves wealth creators. We need them to act morally, consistently and responsibly for the greater good of society. We need to be able to trust them, including trusting in their objectivity and reliability. That kind of banking may be dull; it may not have the potential for massive trading highs and lows, and the bonuses that go with them, but nor does it have the capacity to destroy the lives of ordinary people when gambles do not pay off.

If banks in the retail sector do not perform in a socially responsible fashion (and their performance should be regularly appraised) their banking licenses should be revoked. We cannot allow hard working people to be driven to the point of suicide by institutions parts of which those same desperate and distraught people actually own. It is therefore very worrying that investment in the UK in the retail banking sector has fallen £42 billion in the past year.

Another part of the problem, as I perceive it, is the apparent powerlessness of local bank managers to use their judgment about the needs of clients they know because lending decisions are taken on a 'tick box' basis in a Head Office somewhere, sanitized from the real world of people. I observe what seems to me to be a radical departure from the ethical and moral values which used to inform banking towards a culture of the relentless pursuit of profit at any price and a reckless attitude to other people's money and future livelihood. It is as if the retail banking sector has been morally compromised by association with the culture of investment banking.

Now, however, the majority shareholder is often the tax payer. In these circumstances it is not enough for the banks to indulge in the ruthless pursuit of profit on the premise of delivering shareholder value, leading them to invest heavily in what they hope will prove the more profitable investment arm. There is no shareholder value for the tax payer if banking policy puts people on the dole, causes significant loss of tax revenue, and inflates the cost of the social security system. We require a completely new banking morality that takes full account of the social obligations of financial institutions and that insulates ordinary people and businesses from exposure to the risks of investment banking.

We also require much more effective and powerful regulators, although, sadly, experience shows that the wool can always be pulled over the regulators' eyes. In the unfolding crisis that finally peaked (we hope) in 2008 neither the Regulators nor the Rating Agencies appeared to understand or believe what was going on until it was much too late. Even now it remains to be seen whether the culture which fed the events of the first decade of this millennium has in any way changed. The current investigations into the conduct of Goldman Sachs and an associated hedge fund do not suggest that morality or social responsibility has yet returned.

The mission of God, to which the Church of God must be unfalteringly committed, requires that we speak into the turmoils and tensions of the public space. It requires us to call for fair and morally responsible responses to social dilemmas. I hope that this Church will never shy away from the obligation to put people before power and profit.

++Alan