

Report on CEMS Consultation with Diocesan Synods 2014

Q1: What are the most important aspects of the role of Bishops in the Church of Ireland?

In inviting members of diocesan synods to respond to Questions 1 and 2, no specific options were given. To a degree the responses may have been coloured by the presentation that preceded the answering of the questions in all dioceses (which noted amongst other things that Leadership was the most popular answer to the question amongst General Synod members). Nevertheless the answers to questions 1 and 2 were many and varied. The analysis below highlights some themes that emerged from most dioceses (and the relative prominence given to them). It also notes some of the answers that were specific to certain dioceses and not others.

Leadership was the most popular answer in every diocese except one (Limerick and Killaloe, where it was the second most popular).

The Bishop's pastoral role in relation to clergy also featured prominently and was referenced in every diocese and was never lower than fourth. In most it was second or third most popular answer.

The importance of a Bishop being visible and approachable to laity and undertaking parish visits was also prominent but this category was notably more unevenly spread throughout the dioceses. There did not seem to be a particular rationale to the prominence (or lack of it) given in individual dioceses. It was the most popular answer in the large and relatively sparsely populated Limerick and Killaloe but was much less prominent in the similarly large and sparsely populated Tuam, Killala and Achonry. It featured reasonably prominently in relatively densely populated dioceses such as Dublin and Glendalough (third most popular answer) and Connor (sixth most popular answer) but only three respondents referred to it in the similarly densely populated Down and Dromore.

The Bishop's Communication/Representational/Ambassadorial role was alluded to in every diocese. It was particularly high in Armagh (third most popular answer), perhaps reflecting the Primate's particular role in this regard. It was also the third most popular answer in Cork, Cloyne and Ross and Meath and Kildare. In Dublin and Glendalough, where the Archbishop has a particular role in relation to this, it was the fifth most popular answer.

The Bishop's role in confirmations and ordinations was referred to in most dioceses, typically between the seventh and tenth most popular answer. In all cases, the Bishop's role in Confirmations was more often referred to than his/her role in ordinations.

The Bishop as a focus for the unity of the diocese was referred to in all dioceses at least once. However, the prominence given to this role varied. In some dioceses it was only referred to by one commentator. By contrast it was more prominently referenced in Cashel, Ferns and Ossory (fifth most popular) and Connor (seventh most popular answer).

Similarly, the separate but interrelated themes of vision/strategy and management featured prominently in several diocesan responses but again the prominence of this theme was uneven across dioceses. 'Management' was the third most popular answer in Tuam, Killala and Achonry. 'Vision' however was prominent in Derry and Raphoe (fourth most popular answer), Cork, Cloyne and Ross and Armagh (fourth most popular answer).

An example of a role that featured prominently in one diocese but not others was the bishop's role in parochial management and restructuring. This was particularly prominent in Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh where it was the fifth most popular answer. The appointment of clergy also featured in several other diocesan returns but only referred to by few (about 3 or 4 in each diocese).

Conclusions:

There is a high level of correlation between the answers given at the General Synod in 2013 and the diocesan synods of 2014 with leadership again being the most prominent response, followed by the pastoral role. The importance given to the visibility and approachability of the Bishop and his/her engagement in parish visits (outside confirmations and similar) is worthy of note.

Q2: What challenges do you think the Church of Ireland faces in providing Episcopal Leadership in the Diocese and in Ireland as a whole?

This question changed slightly over the course of the consultation. In early synods, members were asked to answer the question in relation to episcopal leadership in the diocese and in Ireland separately. In later synods, a single question was asked. Again there was no specific guidance given as to how to answer the question so members gave their own thoughts. A quantitative analysis is not possible so a subjective analysis is given, drawing out specific themes that emerge.

Unlike the answer to Question 1 above there was no clear answer that dominated in responses. Finance, lack of interest amongst youth, geographical challenges, secularism and declining attendances all featured prominently but members of diocesan synods differed on the prominence they ascribed to each.

‘Finance’ was probably the closest to a clear overriding answer to Question 2. It was the most popular answer in four of the twelve reports (Down and Dromore, Armagh, Cork Cloyne and Ross and Derry and Raphoe. It was also joint first in Tuam, Killala and Achonry). It was never lower than fourth on the list in any diocese.

Geographical challenges also featured prominently. They were referred to in every diocese although it was not always clear if the commentators were referring to the challenge within their own diocese or the challenge for other dioceses or the Church as a whole. The geographical spread of the diocese was the second most popular response to this query in both Dublin and Glendalough and Connor. Both are geographically relatively small dioceses (though both are also densely populated both for the COI population and the population as a whole).

The lack of Involvement of young people also featured in the responses in every diocese. In Kilmore, Ephraim and Ardagh and Meath and Kildare this was the most prominent issue raised.

Declining attendances and/or apathy also featured in the returns from every diocese. In Clogher this was referred to by more people than any other challenge.

The workload for the individual bishop, particularly administration, featured in the returns from every diocese. While it was not the largest single response in any diocese, it was referred to by many in Meath and Kildare and Limerick and Killaloe (the second most popular response in both dioceses).

Secularism also featured in almost all diocesan responses. Only Meath and Kildare and Cashel, Ferns and Ossory did not have a response that highlighted this challenge.

Conclusions:

There was a relatively high degree of similarity between the answers from the various dioceses. While no two dioceses prioritised the themes in the same way, there was a broad consensus on the nature of the challenges facing Episcopal leadership in the Church of Ireland.

Questions 3, 4 and 5 were Part II of the questionnaire. These were not filled out on the day of the relevant diocesan synod, but members were invited to take the paper home with them and return their thoughts to the diocesan secretary for subsequent forwarding to the Commission. Accordingly, the answers to questions 3, 4 and 5 were fewer, less 'bullet pointed' and more detailed than those to questions 1 and 2 (which were under time restrictions). Accordingly, few answers were exactly alike but a number of themes emerged and the main ones are noted below.

Q3: What changes would you suggest in the appointment process for Bishops?

No Change/Unable to Comment:

There were some in all dioceses who were sceptical of the need for change. There were also some people in all dioceses who said that they were not very knowledgeable about the current procedure and did not feel best placed to comment. A high proportion of people who did respond however either suggested improvements to the current system or expressed some dissatisfaction with it.

Openness/Transparency:

There was a widespread feeling that the current process is not sufficiently open or transparent. Many referenced the Scottish Episcopal Church model as one that should be considered. A commentator from Dublin and Glendalough colourfully commented that the current system "has as many leaks as a sinking ship." Openness and/or transparency was highlighted by at least one commentator (and sometimes several) in most dioceses.

Information for Electors:

There was also a widespread view that electors needed more information on the candidates when making a decision on the election of a new bishop. A member from the South of the country who had served on Electoral Colleges said "one day to elect a bishop without having known beforehand who the runners are is not ideal. Might there not be two or more days (not together necessarily) to reflect and consider candidates? We spend far more time researching candidates for vacant incumbencies." Several commentators from a number of dioceses also felt it would be useful for the electors to meet the candidates.

Advertisement/Application/Interview/CV:

There was a commonly expressed view that the position should be advertised, applications should be sought, interviews undertaken and/or CVs supplied. A suggestion from Cashel, Ferns and Ossory was "a panel from the diocese made up of both clergy and laity with a clearly defined mandate from the diocesan council should interview the candidates for the position." Another commentator from Dublin and Glendalough asked simply, "there should be applications and an interview process. It happens in every other job in the world, why not the Church of Ireland?"

Undesirability of referral to the House of Bishops:

There was a general view expressed that it was undesirable that the election of bishops be deferred to the House of Bishops except at a last resort. Some argued that the Bishops' right to appoint in the event of the electoral college failing to appoint be abolished. A commentator from Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh made a suggestion that was typical of many others, "I would suggest that there should be no rush in appointing a bishop. If the Episcopal Electors fail to appoint at their first meeting (only meeting

at present) a second or even third chance should be afforded to the electors. There should be no pressure in the appointment going before the House of Bishops. At least six months should elapse between the vacancy and the appointment going before the House of Bishops.”

Diocesan Profile:

Several commentators suggested that a diocesan profile be drawn up. One commentator from Tuam, Killala and Achonry said it was “essential that the individual needs and requirements of the particular diocese should have a set of criteria to be examined along with the general set of criteria, skills etc deemed necessary in a bishop.” Similar views were expressed by commentators from Armagh, Meath and Kildare and Dublin and Glendalough.

Local Diocesan Input:

Several suggested that the local diocese needed to have a stronger input (or in the view of some an exclusive input) into the election of a new bishop. One commentator from a Northern Diocese remarked “In appointing a bishop, the clergy and laity in each particular diocese should have final say because they know the specific needs of the diocese.” Others suggested that the vacant diocese should have a majority on the Electoral College. A typical suggestion this point came from a representative from Connor. He or she said, “the appointment of a diocesan bishop ought to involve a process where two-thirds or three fifths of those on the electoral college are from the diocese. The needs of the diocese should take precedence over those of the wider church.” The Armagh anomaly (the fact that the election to Armagh/the Primacy is conducted by the House of Bishops and thus there is no voting input from the diocese of Armagh) was referred to by two respondents from Armagh diocese.

Weighted Majorities:

Currently an Episcopal Electoral College requires a two-thirds majority of both clergy and laity in order to elect. Some commentators, particularly from Connor diocese, felt this was too high a burden. Alternatives such as a ¾ majority with at least 50% of clergy and lay electors or a simple majority of clergy and laity were both suggested.

Q4: What changes would you suggest in Diocesan Structures and Boundaries?

By its very nature the responses to this question were guided to some extent by the diocese of the commentator. The implications of change (or the lack of it) for the diocese were prominent in the mind of many commentators. Another factor at work here is the number of responses from each diocese and the size of the diocesan synod. Larger dioceses with larger synods had (unsurprisingly) more varied responses. Accordingly, the answers in this section are summarised by the responses in each diocese.

Armagh:

The predominant view in Armagh was in favour of diocesan restructuring and various ideas were suggested for alternative arrangements. Between 9 and 11 dioceses/bishops were suggested.

Clogher:

The preponderance of views in Clogher was in favour of some change in diocesan structures at an All-Ireland level. The view that the number and sizes of current dioceses were unsustainable was expressed by several and some made suggestions as to how restructuring could be done. There was

however, some concern about the potential workload for the (fewer in number) bishops. Several suggestions were made to alleviate this including the provision of assistant/suffragan bishops and/or a larger secretariat for the remaining bishops. There were differing views expressed about the desirability of being guided by historic/traditional boundaries or by more contemporary boundaries. Other issues raised in response to this heading included parsons' freehold, outreach to nominal members of the Church of Ireland, parochial support and confirmation training.

Derry and Raphoe:

Mixed views were expressed by members in Derry and Raphoe on changing diocesan structures. Some were in favour of reducing the number of Archbishops and Bishops, but others were concerned that grouping dioceses in a similar manner to parishes merely made the bishop more remote. Full time Archdeacons were suggested in larger geographic dioceses. Another view expressed was that the Church of Ireland has too many diocesan cathedrals and urged a reduction. Others suggested spaces on diocesan boards be elected at rural deanery level.

Down and Dromore:

There were relatively few responses from Down and Dromore but those sent in were all in favour of redrawing boundaries to make for a more representative spread of dioceses that were more reflective of the overall COI population. Some made specific suggestions for diocesan restructuring.

Connor:

There were a large number of returned answers to Questions 3, 4 and 5 from Connor and thus a varied set of responses but a substantial majority of those who replied were in favour of some restructuring of the diocesan boundaries involving a reduction in the number of bishops (although the suggested number varied). There was some concern expressed for the implications of this for geographically large dioceses and various suggestions were made to alleviate this including the provision of suffragans/assistant or area bishops. Some members specifically suggested this for Connor, Down and Dromore, Armagh and Dublin. The suggestion that in more sparsely populated areas, the serving bishop would also be a rector/incumbent in a parish was also raised by several members. Another commentator recommended that the Bishop of Tuam also serve as an assistant to the Primate. The suggestion of a separate diocese of Belfast was also supported by some members. Members also made suggestions in regard to missional links between inner-city and suburban parishes, diocesan synod/council restructuring and separate deaneries for church plants.

Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh:

Most of the respondents in Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh urged caution in relation to diocesan restructuring. Concern was expressed that any amalgamations of dioceses could result in the [new] diocese becoming too large geographically and the implications for the bishop and others travelling was raised by several commentators. One respondent urged that dioceses be made "manageable re travel for Bishop and Diocesan meetings."

Tuam, Killala and Achonry:

Many of the respondents in Tuam, Killala and Achonry made detailed suggestions for diocesan restructuring. The various scenarios presented varied between a Church with between 11 and 9 dioceses. Several commentators emphasised the importance of creating a strong diocese in the West. One commentator remarked "it is very important that small and scattered parishes west of the Shannon or indeed in any outpost on our island be given priority in any discussion. Otherwise the COI

will die out except for the large urban centres. Of course, this requires a degree of realism on behalf of the parishes themselves!” Another commentator probably spoke for many when he or she said “ensure that stronger units/dioceses are created – not to add lesser units together.’ Members also emphasised that restructuring should, in so far as it is possible, reflect the ethos or social geography of the relevant dioceses.

Dublin and Glendalough:

There were mixed views on the desirability of diocesan restructuring in Dublin and Glendalough and a considerable variety of suggested approaches offered by members. Some felt that the Church needed fewer bishops. Others felt change was unnecessary. One commentator said, “smaller dioceses have a role and the existence of a bishop in a remote area helps confidence. If the bishops have more spare time, their gifts could be used for the wider benefit of the Church.” Two members in Dublin and Glendalough (separately) suggested that the Archbishoprics of Tuam and Cashel be reinstated. The four archbishoprics thus created would take the responsibilities of the current bench of bishops while up to eight suffragan or assistant bishops would answer to each.

Meath and Kildare:

A variety of views were expressed in response to Question 4 in Meath and Kildare. Some caution was urged on diocesan restructuring and the view was expressed that dioceses in the south are too big geographically. Some felt that decisions of this nature should be made by the diocese.

Cashel, Ferns and Ossory:

Of those that expressed a view in Cashel, Ferns and Ossory, the majority opposed any readjustment of diocesan structures that could affect their own diocese. The point was raised by several commentators that the diocese had only recently agreed to unify its diocesan council, hence a reluctance to any suggestion of further changes. Concern was also expressed by several that the diocese may become too large and unmanageable. One commentator suggested restructuring dioceses on a county basis.

Cork, Coyne and Ross:

There were a variety of views expressed in the responses from Cork, Coyne and Ross. One commentator suggested no change. Another suggested a reduction in the number of bishops to seven. One other respondent opined that while some merger may be inevitable it was important to be cognisant of peoples’ sense of place. Members also raised the issue of parochial boundaries and suggested increasing clergy missionary activity.

Limerick and Killaloe:

There were mixed views in Limerick and Killaloe to any diocesan restructuring. Some envisaged adjusting diocesan boundaries along a county basis. Others made other suggestions for restructuring the dioceses. One commentator particularly urged that the emphasis in any diocesan restructuring be placed on local transport links, local urban centres and local culture on the ground. There was regularly expressed concern that the diocese might become too large and unmanageable. A number of commentators suggested addressing this by providing for ‘Area Bishops’, paid the same amount as parish clergy or a stipend between the incumbent’s stipend and the bishops’ rate.

Conclusions:

In some dioceses there is a demand for change. In the dioceses most likely to be affected there is a degree of acquiescence to the fact that change is likely but some concern about the prospect of making new diocesan structures too large. Straightforward amalgamations without some mechanism to reduce the bishops' workload and allow him/her more time to exercise his/her episcopal ministry is unlikely to reassure clergy and laity in these dioceses. Dioceses that have undergone a lengthy process of amalgamation before are most reluctant to undertake a new one.

Question 5: Is there anything else you would like to convey to the Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures?

By its nature answers to this question were varied. Many took the opportunity to reiterate points made above. A few themes however were common.

Too Much Administration:

There was a widespread view that the Bishops were forced to spend too much time on administrative matters (particularly central church matters) and this detracted from the time he/she could devote in the diocese. The 'draw of Dublin' was referred to by many, particularly in the Northern dioceses.

Accessibility:

There was a widespread view that the bishop should be accessible to laity and clergy alike. Regular parish visiting was encouraged (also alluded to frequently in answer to question 1 above). The Primate's visits to parishes in Armagh received warm praise from some commentators from that diocese. Related to the issue of the accessibility of the bishop was the issue of accessibility of the clergy and this was alluded to by many commentators in several dioceses. Parish visiting by clergy and/or trained laity was suggested by several commentators.

Team Ministry:

Several commentators (particularly in rural dioceses) raised the issue of team ministry. Commentators in Armagh, Limerick and Killaloe, Clogher and Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh amongst others argued that any diocesan structure must be in a position to facilitate team ministry.

Less Formality:

A number of individuals from different dioceses suggested less formality when addressing a bishop.

Nurturing Ability:

Two individuals from different dioceses suggested keeping an eye on young clergy who might have the ability to become bishops and nurturing their talent. A similar suggestion was made about having a panel of candidates who could be considered for election to the episcopacy when a vacancy arises.