

GENERAL SYNOD 2018

Covenant Council Report Proposer: The Revd Canon Dr Maurice Elliott

**Embargoed Against Delivery
Check Against Delivery**

The story is told of man who went forward for prayer at a healing service. ‘What would like us to pray for?’ enquired the ministry team, to which he replied, ‘Please pray for my hearing’.

The team then gathered around him, laid hands on his ears and offered a beautifully worded prayer, and a few minutes later, when they had finished, one asked him, ‘So, tell us, how is your hearing?’ ‘Oh’, he exclaimed, ‘my hearing is not until Wednesday.’

Archbishop, when Synod gave the Covenant Council a hearing this time last year, the Revd Barry Forde drew an analogy that, whereas the Bill providing for interchangeability of ministry between ourselves and the Methodist Church in Ireland had presented a very inviting shop window since 2014, there remained insufficient stock upon the shelves, were anyone to venture inside and decide to do some browsing. Against that backdrop the Covenant Council has been working intentionally over the past twelve months in an endeavour to supply more substance to what the Covenant can actually represent for each of our traditions and for shared ecumenical witness to the wider Church.

Existing and varied local partnerships – such as Monkstown, Primacy, Maghaberry and Movilla – are all currently in a healthy state, and the Covenant Council continues to monitor and encourage these. The recurring message as to why they are flourishing invariably reaches towards the conclusion of strong relationality, clear communication and generosity of spirit. We are encouraged to see how cooperation now functions well with regard to appointment processes, and we would love to witness more such projects, but, as is suggested by the title, that initiative must come locally. In similar vein we have been delighted to see the emergence of an entirely new arrangement for ministry and mission in the Longford area. We applaud the forward-thinking of those with oversight responsibility, we recognise the significant co-operation of the local rector, Canon David Catterall in allowing for this, and we assure the Revd Christiaan Snell of our prayerful support for genuine prospering as he seeks to develop this new and shared initiative. In Queen’s University Belfast the united

chaplains offers an exciting flagship model of what might be considered and implemented for chaplaincy arrangements elsewhere with the right sense of vision, commitment, permission and leadership. In the Diocese of Clogher we await an update on a pilot scheme which is attempting to bring the ministries of readers and local preachers into closer alignment. And in the realm of training, the Theological Institute and Edgehill Theological College continue to work collaboratively and constructively in all ways possible, with a particular emphasis now on the delivery of the forthcoming certificate pathway for Ordained Local Ministry. In its pursuit of all these agenda items the Covenant Council has re-organised itself into three primary working groups with responsibility respectively for projects, communications and interchangeability, and this revised structure has given renewed impetus to the council's aspirations.

Nevertheless we recognise that there remain certain limitations on how the Covenant is managing to take root and grow both locally and institutionally, and I would like here to name three specific matters. In certain areas there are simply insufficient numbers of Methodists for local parishes to find any meaningful Covenant partner. It is not easy to sustain interest in something that feels intangible. That said, the communications team would certainly want to promote broader awareness and deeper prayerfulness.

Secondly, more work remains to be done on the necessary parameters and regulations within which interchangeability of ministry might be permitted on a more *ad hoc* basis – for example, in the provision of local holiday cover, for shared services or for other one-off ministry occasions. This latter piece of work is being pursued further to a submission of the Interchangeability Working Group to the Archbishops and Bishops. This has been positively received, and we are confident that, as envisaged in the 2014 Bill, such enhanced flexibility may indeed become a fruitful possibility in the near future.

Lastly, in terms of wider ecumenical potential towards the Covenant might point, I should like to raise the provision which lies within the Covenant Council's terms of reference for the attendance of a Presbyterian observer. The Covenant itself emerged from the legacy of the original tripartite conversation involving the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. In certain parts of this island Methodists and Presbyterians inhabit shared ministry schemes. At an international level there has been a re-commitment to dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the World Council of Reformed Churches and in the Irish context there have been some tentative, exploratory conversations. The Covenant Council sees all of this as immensely positive, however, whereas we would warmly welcome a greater depth of engagement with the business of the

Covenant Council from our Presbyterian friends, the limitation on this is that on too many occasions the observer position is recorded as an apology.

In all of this, Archbishop, we cannot forget the over-riding agenda of mission. The Covenant Council sees mission as sitting at the very core of its purpose to exist, but the council needs the pro-active support of many more members across both Churches. It is sometimes said of the imperative of *missio Dei* that it must be seen, not as another slice of the increasingly busy and demanding ministry cake, but rather as the cake-tin in and through which all the other aspects of ministry should be considered, and the same paradigm can be applied to the Covenant. For as long as it remains an elusive and optional add-on to the ecclesial priorities of each of our Churches, it will continue to exist and to contribute, but it cannot fully thrive. If, on the other hand, we are willing to place our belief in the Covenant both pragmatically and with full regulatory permission, then indeed it can offer further exciting opportunities to be enriching and transformative.

Archbishop, I have great pleasure in asking that this year's report of the Covenant Council be taken into consideration.