

GENERAL SYNOD 2008

THE CHURCH OF IRELAND COUNCIL FOR MISSION REPORT

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EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Archbishop and members of Synod, I heard the story recently of a College Professor who placed a glass container on a table at the front of his lecture theatre. He then proceeded to place a large rock in the vessel and enquired of his students, "*Is the container full?*" One boisterous student shouted from the back that of course it was, at which point the Professor took some smaller pebbles from under the table and poured them around the large rock until they reached the top of the vessel and then enquired again of his students, "*Is the container full?*" The loud student once more shouted from the rear that it was plain to see that it was now full. The Professor reached under the table and took out a bag of sand and proceeded to pour the sand over the pebbles until it was overflowing and then asked once more, "*Is it full now?*" The student, not so confident now, replied in a more timid manner that it *appeared to be full!* The Professor then took a bucket of water and poured it into the vessel until it would hold no more and enquired again, "*Is it full now?*" Before anyone could respond, the Professor stated that it was indeed full and no more could be added. He then went on to explain his illustration pointing out that had he placed the pebbles, sand and water in the vessel first, there would have been no room for the large rock. The rock had to be placed in the jar first and then all the other material could fit around it. I want to suggest to Synod today that Jesus handed his disciples a

large rock when he commissioned them to *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”* (Mt 28: 19 (NIV)). The commission to engage in Mission is not an optional extra, but an essential element of any church which is being faithful to the command of the Lord Jesus. We also are handed the same rock by Jesus and the question for us as church is *“At what stage do we try to place the work of mission in the jar that represents the work in our Parishes?”*

In reflecting on the work of the Council for Mission over this past year, I would like to draw your attention to two ways in which the Council has discerned faithful commitment to ongoing engagement with Mission at both home and abroad.

Firstly, on page 322 of member’s Book of Reports you will find information regarding the Council’s recent Mission Questionnaire. It really was most encouraging to find that many Parishes already have existing Mission Links. All the more encouraging though, to discover that 46 parishes made visits to their links. Mission involving real people with real issues gets personal and that is when real engagement begins.

How much more encouraging it was to realise that 61 Parishes have received visits from their links. This implies more of a two-way flow in the relationship, with equal partners with a common Mission. Cardinal Basil Hume, in his foreword to Henri Nouwen’s book *In the Name of Jesus*, comments on partnership in Mission as follows *“There is a special significance in doing things together, especially MissionHenri Nouwen gave the talks which form this book with a companion at his side – it was Bill Van Buren, a valued member of the l’Arche Community...”* In a profound book focussing on his time spent with this community of individuals with mental handicaps, Nouwen records in the

prologue that “*while I was still thinking about Bill’s trip with me primarily as something that would be nice for him, Bill was, from the beginning, convinced that he was going to help me. I later came to realize that he knew better than I.*” Mission in partnership with equals can be more effective and empowering for all parties than traditional models of support with little real engagement.

Secondly, on page 321 of member’s Book of Reports, you will notice reference to a Joint Mission Conference which took place in November 2007. We live in a rapidly changing world where it can no longer be assumed that everyone in our community has some link with a local church. The aim of this conference was essentially to help our churches tease out what it means to engage in mission in the Ireland of today. The conference enabled those already pioneering ways of being church in a fresh way to share with those contemplating such engagement. This whole issue of engagement with those on the fringes affects each and every church in our land. For some in our church, there is no sense of the need to change. For others there is that sense of need but also a growing frustration that some graduates of past models of theological training feel ill-equipped to meet these changes in our society and in our church. Ultimately, this is very much a work in progress which the Council is actively seeking to encourage.

In closing, I would like to steer members of Synod to the illustration of the jar and the rock and ask once more “*At what stage do we try to place the work of mission in the jar that represents the work in our Parishes?*”