

**GENERAL SYNOD 2009**

**BOARD OF EDUCATION REPORT**

**Seconded by the Most Reverend Alan Harper, Archbishop of Armagh**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**EDUCATION DEBATE  
GENERAL SYNOD 2009**

Your Grace,

I want to begin with the articulation of a principle. The principle is this: education should have more than a merely utilitarian purpose. Education should lead to the development of children and adults in an holistic way, addressing body, mind and spirit. It should lead to the drawing out of the divinely provided potential in every child. Churches, and others who share this outlook and expectation, hold a vision of education based on the values of Christ. Without such a vision we believe that the quality and comprehensiveness of education is seriously impoverished, falling prey to unrelieved materialist secularism. That is why we have articulated as the first aim in our report: *to develop, along with other churches, a clear and shared vision of education shaped by the core values of the Christian faith.*

After centuries of the four main Churches being the principal educational providers in Ireland, significant change began to take place. In Northern Ireland during the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Protestant Churches agreed to hand control of the schools they had established into the hands of government. This was done with clear and binding legal safeguards built into the legislation. It represented on the part of the churches a huge investment in the project of universal public education as hundreds of well established schools, open to all children, were entrusted to the overall control of the state.

The legal agreements, freely entered into by the government of the day, ensured that the churches had a continuing role in the oversight of transferred schools through rights of

nomination to Boards of Governors and also to Area Boards which, in effect, took over the proprietorial role in respect of schools now transferred to the “Controlled Sector”.

As members of Boards, church representatives could oversee and safeguard the interests of the “Transferors” in what were recognized as “church related schools”. By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church retained both ownership and control of their own schools.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as educational systems and requirements have come under scrutiny, major changes have been proposed. As these changes unfold the Transferor Churches become increasingly concerned. They find themselves marginalized, excluded and denied the parity of esteem that they deserve. The Catholic Schools’ Sector has not been similarly marginalized largely because they have steadfastly ensured that their own schools are not handed into state control.

The long awaited, but only recently published, Review of Public Administration Paper 20 proposes to break fundamentally the trust and the legal agreements between the Protestant Churches and the state by eliminating all the rights of those Churches in decision making for schools attended by Protestant children. By contrast, Catholic representatives will continue to have decision making powers in that sector of schools which most Roman Catholic children attend.

The Department argues, on what I regard as highly questionable grounds of “equality”, that since controlled schools are publicly owned it is legally impossible under equality legislation for churches to have representation on any new ownership body for those schools as of right.

Already, long before the imminent incorporation of Stranmillis University College into Queen’s University, representation of the churches on the governing body of Stranmillis had been removed, also on similarly questionable equality grounds. The Protestant Churches now have no influence in the governance of the principal institution training teachers for the Controlled sector, most of the schools of which are church related

schools. Is it any wonder that we feel marginalized, our rights violated? How can we ensure, therefore, that the Education and Skills Authority can become the disinterested patron of the full educational well being of all of our children, body, mind and spirit, when, as things stand, we perceive it to be engaged in a secularizing exercise?

I believe that it is beyond contention that the Protestant Churches' representatives, as members of Area Boards and as governors of schools in the Controlled Sector, have offered the most constructive and positive engagement. The Department of Education seems to us unwise and insensitive in pursuing a policy of exclusion.

It matters to us, and I believe to a significant majority of people in Northern Ireland, that the voice of our churches is heard by right: heard where schools are planned, where they are governed, and where their ethos is determined. That is why we seek to work with others. Our history witnesses to our willingness to cooperate and collaborate with others who share our vision to develop partnerships which can take us forward not only to new but to better provision for the education of our children.

Current government policy will diminish to the point of extinction our role in education. We appeal to legislators to amend proposals which, as they stand, are unjust and inequitable. The TRC is currently addressing these concerns with the political parties of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I welcome the forthcoming meeting that the TRC will have with the Minister and her party. I trust that this will bring clarity, understanding and a full appreciation of the position of the Churches.

These are matters fundamental to the Churches' role in public life. In seeking our rights we are, as I said at the outset, pursuing a vision of education. For us, the core of that vision must always be holistic and shaped by the values of the Christian faith.