

GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND
ARMAGH 2009

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The Most Revd Alan Harper, OBE

Members of the General Synod, dear sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, it is a privilege for me to welcome you all, together with our distinguished ecumenical guests and other visitors, to Armagh in this year of grace 2009.

We meet in what I might call “experimental” circumstances. This will be a weekend rather than a midweek synod. To meet these new circumstances the Honorary Secretaries have gone to great lengths sensitively to reorganize and reorder our business and to meet the challenge of constructing an agenda for Sunday around our principle obligation which is to witness through worship to the glory of God.

This will require us to do our work in synod in new ways. In particular, rather than introducing each report with speeches we shall lay reports before synod, invite comments from synod members and then enable proposers to reply to the discussion and then to move that synod receive each report. Issues identified by committees as of special importance will be brought forward by way of resolution and debated separately. In addition we hope that members of synod may feel empowered to suggest issues that deserve exploration by the relevant committees. In this way we shall re-orientate our business by looking forward rather than back.

In another innovation the Bishop of Limerick and Killaloe, who will lead our daily devotions, has agreed to my request that part of those devotions should include a short address. On this, the first day of our Synod we shall have the privilege of being addressed by the current Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Rt Revd Dr Donald Patton. Tomorrow’s session will hear a short address from the President of the Methodist Church, the Revd Aian Ferguson. They are both present here this morning and I ask you to greet them warmly.

On Sunday, at the General Synod Eucharist at 11.00am in Armagh Cathedral, the Bishop of Limerick will give a short address to which His Eminence Sean, Cardinal Brady will respond. It is, I believe, right that, despite denominational differences, Christians should come together around the Word of God to be enriched and encouraged by one another. I am deeply grateful to Cardinal Brady and to the Moderator and the President for generously agreeing to participate in this way.

Ten years ago, at the General Synod of 1999, a report was received addressing the issue of sectarianism and the impact of sectarianism on and in the life of the Church of Ireland. That report and the resolutions appended to it led to the establishment of a committee which commissioned the “Hard Gospel” Scoping Study. That study in turn led to the initiation of what came to be called “The Hard Gospel Project”, a comprehensive address

to that complex of related issues which arise when we endeavour seriously and honestly to deal positively with difference.

I want publicly to salute the work of the Hard Gospel Committee, led with great vigour and skill by the Dean of Armagh, the Very Revd Patrick Rooke, and also to congratulate the staff of the Hard Gospel Project: the Project Director, the Revd Earl Storey with his two colleagues, Mr Philip McKinley and Mr Stephen Dallas. Their solid, sometimes spectacular and often ground breaking work over a three year period constitutes the most comprehensive and creative address, by a denomination, to the problems of a society struggling to deal with the legacy of distrust, fear, and hostility that has blighted Ireland over centuries.

I want to emphasize, however, that not all of the issues tackled by the Hard Gospel Project are ancient in origin, some are relatively new, yet all have in common the essential human characteristic of suspicion and fear of the other. As a society and as a Church we have a great deal further to go in seeking to move beyond such destructive reactions. Prejudice and intolerance poison both the person and society as a whole. Yet, I believe, we are beginning to demonstrate that 21st Century Ireland is moving to rid itself of the prejudices that constitute such life threatening agents of division.

Our institutional response as a Church to the continuation of the Gospel challenge to love one's neighbour with the same commitment with which one loves God and oneself is now committed to the guidance of the "Hard Gospel Implementation Group", chaired by the Bishop of Limerick. It is essential that as a whole Church we continue to engage in this work in parishes, workplaces and High Streets throughout Ireland.

In the sadly maligned Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, a report that contained not one but thirty one major recommendations, you can read these sentences: *Given the strong Christian tradition in Northern Ireland, the Christian Churches have a particular responsibility to take a lead role within communities in addressing the destructive presence of ongoing sectarianism.*

[p28]

Later in the CGP report these sentences occur:

Any society moving forward from conflict has no choice but to address the separations that exist between its people. These separations are negative and destructive when they exist in housing, employment and social life. Specifically the arguments about the ethos or quality of education provided in the faith based sectors have to be balanced against the reality that reconciliation may never be achieved if our children continue to attend separated schools.

By definition and nature sectarianism involves religion and the negative mixing of religious belief and politics. When religion is used to draw boundaries, whether communal or territorial, and to reinforce patterns of inequality and social conflict, then prejudice and discrimination are given divine sanction, even if such behaviour contradicts the professed belief of its adherents. [p77]

I want to make a considered and, I stress, personal response to the challenge set out in the Hard Gospel Project Final Report and in the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past. I want to do so in the context of what I believe is an essential concept for life in community, the concept of “inclusivity”. I want to contend that it is essential for a community to embrace a policy and ethos of inclusivity because this is the most effective antidote to division and conflict. I also want to suggest that as a concept it is more dynamic than the static notion of “equality” which assumes or commands that which it cannot deliver, except in the narrow context of equality under the law.

One question that may be asked is, “What might inclusivity look like in the context of the faith based sector of our educational system?” An initial response to that question needs first to take account of the following realities:

First, the system of education throughout Ireland began with the Christian Churches, particularly the four main churches. The entry of the state and secular society into the business of educating children and young people arose very late. I believe the churches are right to take the view that education based in Christian values and taught in the context of the ethos of the Christian faith is good for children and good for society. Education must not be devoid of either its moral or its spiritual context.

Second, it is not inevitable that communities will be and must remain divided if children are educated within different denominational contexts. This is not an issue of undue concern in the Republic of Ireland, and the pressure in Great Britain for the expansion of schools run by churches and other faith communities does not indicate a perception on the part of the UK government that community cohesion or educational standards are threatened thereby.

Third, there is general acceptance that educational systems should preserve the right of parental choice. In this context it is important that parental choice should always be informed choice, and also that choice is genuinely available. My belief is that a significant majority of parents in both jurisdictions in Ireland favour the education of their children within a school shaped by the Christian religious ethos of their choice.

My principle suggestion, therefore, is that there should be issued a policy imperative for all schools to create purposeful partnerships across all the perceived divides. Such partnerships might embrace extended student and staff exchanges, common approaches to learning in specified subject areas, and joint extracurricular activities. The idea of “area learning communities” has been around for a long time and has received varying levels of consent in different locations but it is rarely seen as an educational and social priority. A deliberate policy of inclusivity through partnership could redress any perceived divisive effects of separated education.

I also want to suggest that a policy of inclusivity goes a long way to addressing the other serious educational division in Northern Ireland, that between selective and non-selective schools in the secondary sector. I am firmly of the opinion that there is an urgent need to construct purposeful local partnerships among schools across the two sectors. It is not my

purpose in this address to consider the vexed question of whether selection should or should not be retained, in what form or at what age. If, however, a new way of relating were to be achieved through partnerships among selective and non-selective schools, on a similar basis to that suggested for schools of different denominational allegiances, much might be accomplished in breaking down perceived social divisions.

Among other things, my hope is that such an approach might achieve a new parity of esteem amongst schools in the perception of both parents and children, thus removing or at least lowering social barriers and prejudice. It should also result in the achievement locally of the educational capacity to offer the full curriculum entitlement to all students at secondary level.

In addition, the Further Education sector has an important role to play and must be incorporated in a meaningful and systematic way, into such a pattern of relationships.

Social cohesion is a justifiable and desirable educational aim. The problem with the current level of trench warfare is that it reinforces boundaries and social stereotypes rather than removing them. Purposeful partnership is one approach which could break down barriers and bring us closer to building a society based on principles of inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

If inclusivity is good for education it is essential within the community of the Body of Christ. One of the objectives of the Hard Gospel Project was to address issues of difference within the structures of the Church of Ireland. Look around you today, however, and you will see that this gathering in General Synod and the structures we employ to derive synod representation are less than fully inclusive. It can hardly be said that women are represented here in numbers equivalent to their presence and influence within the membership of the Church. Where are the young people? What are the chances that married couples with children can contribute to our discussions? Why is there no crèche? What provision do we make for people with hearing impairment, visual impairment, intellectual or mobility impairment? Leave aside for the moment representation within the General Synod, what opportunities of participation and service do we offer to some of these groups of people in the day to day life of the Church of Ireland?

Furthermore, how can we pretend to be inclusive as a Synod when it costs Synod members so much to attend? How can we expect people in employment to take three days leave each year to attend a midweek synod? How can we pretend, in these straightened times, to be careful stewards of the Church's resources when it costs the Representative Body, on average, £70,000pa to hold a three day synod whether midweek or at a weekend? Just imagine what the sums expended by the RB and synod members might contribute to the work of the Bishops' Appeal for World Development if those resources were not committed to meeting our accommodation costs – I estimate not less than an extra £200,000 pa.

Members of the General Synod, you will not have failed to notice that one item of business set for the last day of our meeting this year requires the election of two long established committees. I understand that these committees have not met frequently in recent years but it seems to me that they could offer us a great deal by way of reviewing our procedures. Those two committees are the Legislation Committee and the Standing Orders Committee.

I wonder if it might not be the case that with judicious revision of our Standing Orders and thoughtful modifications to the way we manage legislation we could find ways to complete all of our statutory work by holding two one day Saturday meetings a year. This would still leave energy for another day when special issues might be debated, presented or celebrated at considerably greater leisure. In such circumstances no-one with employment commitments would be excluded; no-one on limited incomes would be excluded; no-one with disabilities would be excluded; no young people or parents would be excluded; no women would be excluded...or at least they would not if they could be persuaded to stand for election and were subsequently returned by diocesan synods.

If we are serious about inclusivity, should we, perhaps, be considering, for example, quotas for women and for young people? If diocesan synods found themselves unable to meet the quotas, why not allow nominations by Standing Committee, Mothers' Union, Youth Department, diocesan bishops and others?

You will recognize, of course, that I am setting out to be deliberately provocative in an attempt to persuade us, as a synod and as a Church, to begin to think outside the box, just as the Hard Gospel Project did with its "Beyond the Box" Seminars. Our Lord constantly pushed the boundaries of what conventional opinion considered to be acceptable: he touched lepers; he engaged women in conversation - for all the world as if their opinions mattered!; he gave preference to children over adults, at the same time rebuking his own disciples; he challenged the conventionally righteous and preferred the company of self confessed sinners; he took service to a completely new level by washing the disciples feet, not excluding the feet of the betrayer Judas Iscariot whom he also served with food at the very moment when betrayal was about to take place; he forgave his tormentors from the cross and welcomed one of his crucified companions into paradise; he healed the brokenness and the broken heart of his own mother by giving her a new son to care for and who, in turn, would care for her. That son, from that day forward, took her into his own home. In the most extravagant and redemptive pushing of the boundaries of all time, he rose from the dead. He would not, could not be chained by the limitations of this world and he sent the Spirit to the Church at Pentecost so that we might likewise be freed for unchained thinking and acting. He excluded no one who came to him in humility or in need. He rejected no one who sought to serve him, making service and love the touchstone of discipleship. Inclusivity is at the core of the being and doing of Jesus. As it was for him so it must be for us.

This leads me to say something about the "credit crunch" and the current dire economic circumstances across the world. Let me be clear, I am no economist. I am not qualified to judge whether, on the one hand, "quantitative easing" and "fiscal stimulus" with the

associated mountain of national debt, or, on the other hand, severe budgetary constraint and taxing until the pips squeak will provide antidotes to the evils that confront us. Indeed, if you are not aware of it already, the effects of the downturn on both the capital values and the revenues generated by the assets of the Church of Ireland will become more than clear as the business of this synod unfolds.

I am equally unqualified to enter into mature judgment on the products and practices of the bankers and governments that led us into the crisis. I remind all who are inclined to be harshly judgmental that when the returns on our assets were strong I heard no one in the Church criticizing the financial institutions that generated those revenues.

However, I believe it is necessary to say as a matter of principle that, as a matter of principle, banks and bankers, directors and senior executives, have a direct and primary responsibility to act with both absolute probity and complete responsibility in respect of the monies entrusted to them by account holders and shareholders. It is not their money to play with. It is not acceptable that high risk or imperfectly understood strategies should be allowed to threaten the deposits of customers and the investments of shareholders. This is a fiduciary issue, a matter of good faith and honour. Therefore I find it surprising that those responsible for the corporate governance of banking institutions permitted the taking of risks that threatened not only the assets of their depositors and shareholders but also the viability of business, industry and even local government, along with the jobs of their employees. I wonder if there may not be a case for those with the responsibility of governance in banks that indulged in unnecessarily risky strategies seriously to consider their position, for either they were complicit in the risky strategies, or they were asleep and over-dependent on the officers of their institutions, or they were individually or corporately inadequate in their understanding of what their employees were doing.

One thing is abundantly clear: whatever is to emerge from the crisis confronting the economies of the world there is an urgent need for a completely new ethic to replace the flawed economic ethics of the past. In the case of international banking, it will be imperative that a new and vigorous ethic shall form the basis of a powerful regulatory system that can challenge risky or over complicated practices even when those strategies appear successfully to be generating profits.

When it comes to the actions of governments, what worries me about quantitative easing and fiscal stimulus is the extent to which these things are deliberately designed to generate more borrowing and more conspicuous consumption. That outlook, at least in part, led to the culture that pervaded the very model that crashed so spectacularly last year. That model depended upon an acceptance of the mantra of Gordon Gecko that “greed is good”, together with the doctrines that conspicuous consumption is essential and that secular individualism must be exalted above considerations of the commonweal. Such guiding principles, for that is what they became, must be abandoned in constructing the world economy of the future. Those principles were creative of a society that tacitly approved selfishness and excluded those who were financially uncompetitive.

These things matter more than, perhaps, we have heretofore realised because there is a clear correlation between disparities in wealth and two important social indicators: levels of sickness and early death on the one hand, and criminality and antisocial behaviour – that is community distress – on the other. Studies show that it is not absolute poverty that is the correlate but the size of the gap between rich and poor. So, for example, the UK, Portugal and the USA are among those nations with the widest gaps in the developed world and they exhibit the highest levels on the indicators of poor health, early mortality and social dysfunction. The Scandinavian countries have the smallest gaps and the lowest indicators of morbidity and community distress. I have not seen comparative figures for the Republic of Ireland but my guess is that disparities are high and indicators of social distress equally high.

Again, we are approaching issues that have to do with the essential elements of inclusivity. The greater the disparities, the greater the social exclusion, the greater the incidence of social disintegration; and now, of course, we face the reality that many more hundreds of thousands of people will suffer the hardships, insecurities and injustices of unemployment. In a world seeking a new ethic for the conduct of business, inclusivity requires that gaps be closed not widened and society become careful for the needs and the inclusion of the most vulnerable, whether we deem them to be deserving or not.

In respect of those greatly increased numbers of people now facing hardship as a result of the current recession, there arises the question of how the Church of Ireland might respond pastorally in these challenging times. The Church in Society Committee has published a response entitled “Pastoral care in the Recession” which I understand is now available in pdf and pamphlet form. Other agencies within the Church are collaborating to identify initiatives that offer practical interventions. We are right to ask, “What can be done by the Church to provide support and guidance? What signposts can we provide for those whom we know to be battling very great odds?”

Rarely is it possible to identify free funds that can be made available to assist people in sustained situations of hardship, although it is the case that limited financial support may be available in Northern Ireland through the Board for Social Action. I know that the Church in Society Committee and the Board for Social Action would welcome any suggestions or comments members of Synod might wish to offer. The internet is a vital tool of communication here because of the ease with which a website can be updated.

Further afield, developing economies and the world’s poorest people are confronted by greater hardship even than those encountered in Ireland. The issue of structural injustice in the sharing of the earth’s resources has become immeasurably more urgent in current economic circumstances. The generosity of donor nations in seeking to come to the aid of people in the poorest countries is, of course, inspiring when commitments entered into are fully met in timely fashion. Cuts in international aid budgets are deeply to be deplored.

However, there is growing and increasingly compelling evidence that international aid does not work well. It tends to institutionalize dependency, keeping people alive but in

continuing poverty, whilst, often disproportionately, benefiting donor governments and highly paid consultants. It has also gained an unenviable reputation for feeding corruption.

When the European Union set out to provide structural funds and cohesion funds for less privileged members countries of the EU, it did so on the basis of seeking to secure the well being of the whole European Community through sustained support for nationally determined strategic development objectives. In other words, it operated on a principle of “inclusivity” by which less favoured nations were seen to require help from the whole community on the basis of need and in recognition of the fact that improving the well being of any one member makes a contribution to improving the well being of every member. Ireland benefited substantially in just this way. Such principles should be applied to the developing world. It requires us to reframe our thinking in order to see the global family not as foreign nations in competition but as interdependent communities in a relationship of complementarity.

We must not come out of this present economic crisis without having accessed a morality that places inclusivity at the heart of our systems; and, since this is not a national but a globalized economy, such inclusivity will have to put particular emphasis on raising the levels of prosperity of the poor by redressing structural injustice.

A new global economic morality will also be one that prioritizes investment in green solutions to the challenges of life and the problems associated with global warming, waste management and the sustainability of populations. It is vital to ensure that the most vulnerable of all will not become disproportionate victims of environmental degradation through devastating climate change and unsustainable population growth.

Let me set aside political correctness for a moment to say that not to address the issue of unsustainable population growth ignores one of the relevant criteria among many others. It is not fashionable to raise the issue of unsustainable population growth but it cannot be ignored indefinitely. However, what is too often overlooked in debates about birth rates and population increase is that, historically, it has been access to prosperity that has brought about significant reductions in family size and population growth. This may be partly because better nutrition and access to effective health care reduces the felt need to have many children in order to support parents in their old age. It may also have something to do with the intention not rashly to compromise the benefits of newly found prosperity.

Whatever the reasons, the correlation between rising living standards and falling birth rates is well established and this is yet another reason why inclusivity – the social and economic inclusion of poor people – is an essential concept to embrace. If we do not achieve these things then consider the consequences. They include, as well as chronic malnutrition, mass migrations of desperate peoples fleeing rising sea levels, over cultivation, soil depletion and endemic crop failure.

Let us be clear, climate change will be thoroughly inclusive in its impact. We require inclusive economic and technological solutions in response to the challenges that face us all, a pioneering and generous new ethic of inclusivity, if the life of this planet is to be sustained in justice, hope, peace and mercy.

Christians have a particular interest in achieving these things because justice, the alleviation of poverty, care for the vulnerable, love of neighbour and careful stewardship of the earth as part of the divine creation are all biblical and dominical priorities. Furthermore, churches are not without economic power and national and international influence. Stalin once foolishly asked “How many divisions has the Pope?” Little did he understand the number and the power of those divisions. The church can and must exert maximum moral influence within all those societies throughout the world where Christians are to be found.

In the absence of a sustained international commitment to the abolition of unjust structures we shall be forced to fall back on aid programmes. They are no better than second best solutions and we must be committed to advocating the need for replacing unjust structures with fair ones, but, until justice flows like a river, aid programmes are all that we have. The churches in the developed world can and must work unstintingly to support the work of indigenous churches in the developing world that serve vulnerable communities and minister to the poor, the sick and the homeless. Not only is this a contribution to capacity building, it is also the most cost effective way of changing lives and circumstances in a world of unjust structures.

However, when I see the level of the overheads of some international development agencies, it concerns me that the generosity of people does not always seem to be matched by the cost effectiveness of some of the NGOs. It also concerns me that NGOs too often insist on inventing “de novo” both indigenous and non-indigenous infrastructures in order to deliver their aid precisely where the churches already have existing indigenous and accountable structures, well established and in place not for the short term but for the indefinite future. In the case of aid agencies directly associated with the Christian Churches I believe that we can reasonably expect those agencies to prioritize the channelling of both emergency and development funding through the local church, allowing local people to identify and assess their own priorities. If this does not happen I believe we have a right to want to know why.

I have tried to set before you, members of the General Synod, a vision of inclusivity which is both global and local. The proclamation of the Gospel of Christ in thought, speech and action is what it means to be called to participate in the mission of God to the world He so graciously loves. Our love for the world must aspire to approach the generosity of His love. His love embraced and included all, for did not God so love the world that he gave His only begotten Son that all who believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life? For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him, indeed that all might have life in Him and have it in abundance. That life and that love is what we proclaim and what compels us to exclude

none and strive to be selflessly generous in our dealings with all, even those from whom we differ profoundly. May the Holy Spirit of God aid us in our weakness!

ENDS