

**GENERAL SYNOD 2009**

**REPORT OF THE REPRESENTATIVE CHURCH BODY**

**Seconded by The Archbishop of Dublin, The Most Reverend Dr John Neill**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

In the See House in Dublin, there is a wonderful round table with this inscribed on a brass plate –

*“This table belonged to the Right Hon. William Gladstone, M.P. and at it he and the Ministers of the day plotted the Destruction of the Irish Church....”*

This statement obviously referred to the Irish Church Act of 1869, drafted at that table. In the atmosphere of the day, the Disestablishment was for many nothing short of disaster. It may have taken some people many years to recognise that it was in fact a liberation rather than a disaster. It is poignant that this inscription dates not from the time of Disestablishment, but rather when the table was presented to the Archbishop of Dublin – in a year in which it was just as well that the Church of Ireland was not the Established Church – that year being 1916. From that table, however I learn afresh that apparent disaster and destruction may in fact be a time of fresh opportunity. Such surely lies close to the heart of faith in the God who brings light out of darkness and hope out of despair.

I am delighted that Sydney Gamble, Chairman of the RCB Executive, has given us such a realistic picture of where we are today in the Church of Ireland in terms of a financial balance sheet. He has not told it as a story of disaster, but rather as a story of a challenge for careful management, and he has let us see what is being done and what is intended. I must pay tribute to the members of the Representative Body and of its Executive, clerical and

lay alike, for their dedication and sense of responsibility. I also pay tribute to the Chief Officer and his senior management team for the very determined way in which they have addressed this new situation, and the co-operation that has come from the staff of Church House at every level. As one who is continually in and out of Church House, I sense a very positive attitude among staff members and this must be acknowledged.

If Disestablishment was seen as a virtual destruction of the Church, even by some of its members, today some might be tempted to see the financial situation in the same light. I believe there is another way of looking at the situation.

Financial constraints mean that we must decide very clearly what work should continue to be funded from the centre. Financial constraints mean that we must resist the temptation to rush headlong after every new idea, scheme, project and apparently worthy cause. In fact, I detect that many of the parishes and the clergy are growing weary of schemes and projects foisted on them. The cutting edge of the work of the Kingdom of God is not that done by central committees, but is what is done at the local level, parochial and diocesan. Even when we consider what is done essentially by various central bodies, important as it may be, can we pause in some of this work? By that I mean, does it matter that we settle for a longer timescale, wait for a more opportune time? There are various proposals before this very Synod that are less than urgent, but are very good in themselves – I wonder if more restraint is needed?

If these difficult times could make us more aware that our responsibility as members of the Church of Ireland is local, that funding must come from the giving of members, and not from past legacies, we

could well discover that we are more effective in our work for God's Kingdom.

On page 21 of the Report, there is extended reference to the Training of Ordinands – and the Proposer of this Report has already made reference to this. It is most encouraging that we have a constant flow of those coming for selection for training, and this is prior to the economic downturn, but still continues. The situation for vocations is encouraging, though we would like to see a higher proportion of younger ordinands among them. The Representative Body has been most supportive of the need addressed by the Bishops for a new type of training. There have been constant changes every thirty or forty years in the training of clergy, and the model commencing this year will see those training full-time or part-time being prepared both academically and practically for new challenges, and for deployment which may be stipendiary or non-stipendiary, full-time or part-time. It is the first step in a process that will provide for constant and on-going equipping of clergy and indeed of laity too for ministry in a fast changing Ireland. The rate of change will hardly slow down, and our methods and approach have to be flexible and innovative. The fact that the Church is producing ordinands, that men and women are hearing God's call in this manner, suggests to me that the financial commitment in this area is a priority for the Church through the Representative Body, and this seems to be widely accepted.

The Representative Body Report makes reference to many aspects of the work of the Church of Ireland, and doubtless others will point to these. My plea in seconding the Report is that we would each ask ourselves whether our own favourite project is a priority, or whether it can be handled

in another way. This is not a time for despair, but it is a time for realism, and asking what God may be saying in our present difficulties.