

**GENERAL SYNOD 2010**

**BOARD OF EDUCATION REPORT (NI) REPORT**

**Proposed by Canon John McKegney, Diocese of Armagh**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Your Grace,

William Butler Yeats said "*Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.*" These words ring in my ears as stand to speak. It is both an honour and a terrible responsibility to be asked to introduce and propose the adoption of the Board of Education Report (Northern Ireland).

It is an honour because we are fortunate to be served by one of the finest such committees I have ever served on. It is largely composed of experts in the field who gladly give of their time to this work for the good of our children and young people and the role of our church in good governance of education.

Trying to explain what is going on in educational organization in Northern Ireland at present is like *teaching a dyslexic octopus to dance!*

That is why proposing this report is also a terrible responsibility

If you take a look at the executive summary on page 360 you will see some of the areas of concern for the Board.

I want to focus on the first two

- 1. Education Bill 2008**
- 2. The ownership of and representation on Controlled Schools**

Page 360, second last paragraph, the report states

*“The Transferor Representatives’ Council (TRC), which represents the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Ireland on education matters in NI, believes that the proposals break faith with existing legal rights for transferors. “*

As a result much of the energy of the churches’ work in education has been spent contending for the rights of transferors in education administration. The education Secretaries of the three churches’ Boards of Education have taken part in countless Stormont meetings with political parties and departmental meetings with officials from the Dept of Education.

Without going into the details; let just look at what is at stake here:

- ✘ The potential loss of rights given in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which gave churches a right of nomination to Education and Library Boards – a proposed single education authority (ESA) could remove church representation as of right.
- ✘ A change to the nature of the controlled sector of schools which developed from original transferred church schools. These schools could in future be held together loosely in a sector and connected to an ownership body without church representation.

**The Education Bill 2008** would establish the ESA, ‘The Education and Skills Authority’. It was due to have been up last year. What is proposed is a single authority to control the administration of services for all schools in NI. However the legislation to create the new body removes transferors’ historic rights of membership currently held on Education and Library Boards.

The Board is calling for continuation of those transferors rights of membership of decision-making bodies for the Controlled sector of schools and will be seeking your support in the resolution appended to this report.

### **Controlled schools – ownership and representation**

Controlled schools are so called because they are ‘Controlled’ by the ELBs.

Originally Controlled Schools were to serve the whole community with all Churches involved. It was a very advanced vision in the 1920s but the Roman Catholic Church didn’t want to be involved. At that time in return for continued ownership and control its

schools received reduced funding. Today however virtually all schools receive equal funding.

Under ESA the Catholic church will maintain its rights to manage its own schools but there would be no position by right on decision making bodies for controlled schools for the representatives of the CoI, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, all of whom transferred their schools in good faith.

Quite simply the three Churches see this as an issue of parity of treatment.

The three main Protestant churches, from which all Church Transferors come, do not want simply to mirror the Roman Catholic sector – we know our schools are different and that we serve in a pluralist setting. We are not asking to run controlled schools, simply to be a rightful partner along with others from the community and professionals with a say in the planning, development, and advocacy for those schools.

We also wish to ensure that schools that the majority of our children attend have an ethos which reflects Christian faith and values.

The Transferors Representatives' Council has been engaged with the Department and the minister to consider various options to allow transferors to continue their membership of decision making bodies for the controlled sector. **Ironically it is equality and anti-discrimination legislation which is hindering progress.** Thus far no satisfactory solution has been found. In pressing for this we have had the full support of the ELBs and especially those members who are RC Trustees and most of the political parties.

*. In the case of the SELB, on which I serve, the support was unanimous - including that of Sinn Fein Councillors.*

The resolution before you today seeks support for the stance of the TRC in pursuing the continuance of its rights of membership of decision making bodies for controlled schools. We believe that this is an important work we are engaged in and as three churches we are

united in a cause. We also draw you attention to the very excellent joint working of the three main church education Boards in the intensive work carried on this year.

Transferors are united in standing up for their historic rights but also continue to be open to examine options for the future. Since the turn of the year however the context has changed.

The minister has not been able to obtain cross party support for the Education Bill at the executive which would deliver the reforms. Hence she has had to continue to provide for educational administration by extending the life of ELBs – although she has reduced their membership. In the case of three Boards this is down to six members – interestingly three of the four boards are chaired by Transferors.

It is neither good nor healthy. *Eg.* I serve as a member of the Interim SELB – six of us, 2 teachers, two RC Trustees and two Transferors are carrying out the work of the previous board of 36 members including teacher appointments and school planning. We are seriously stretched to meet the schedule of work.

The Department of Education (DE) is pressing Boards to deliver a Convergence Delivery Plan to achieve economies through streamlining of services. All of this puts the churches in the spotlight –with the probability of difficult decisions soon to be made especially around cost cutting- church representatives on Boards feel very vulnerable.

I hope this gives member a sense of the important activity of the Board in the field of public education – **If it all seems complicated and unresolved this is because it is - complicated and unresolved!**

However we have noticed a spin-off for the churches. Due to the constant engagement with politicians and Department officials, the profile of transferors has risen considerably in the field of education in NI, and the contribution of the churches to the debate about education in the public square has been noticed and appreciated by church members and the wider community.

Our sense is that although this seems a time of adversity for the churches, it could also be a time of re-definition of our role in society and of shaping the future.

This is a vital Board in the life of our Church.

At the outset I commended the dedication of members but all of what is achieved is only possible as a result of the untiring, detailed and unfailingly courteous work of the Secretary to the Board the Revd Ian Ellis. We are fortunate to have such leadership at this critical time. He is coveted by the other churches!

*"Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire."* Let that be a fire of enthusiasm which burns brightly, to bring a fair, effective, and efficient education system for the good of all in our community.

It gives me great pleasure to propose this report of the Board of Education NI and to propose the resolution.

#### **GENERAL SYNOD RESOLUTION (May 2010)**

*The General Synod of the Church of Ireland unreservedly supports the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) in seeking the continuation of rights given to the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Methodist Church in Ireland, on the transfer of their schools to the State, namely the legal right to appoint governors to those transferred schools and their successors and the right to membership of the regional ownership and decision making bodies for those schools and their successors.*