

# SPECIAL MEETING OF THE GENERAL SYNOD 2011

## BILL No 1

### SPEECH OF SECONDER

#### RIGHT REV KEN GOOD, BISHOP OF DERRY AND RAPHOE

I am commending this Bill as a means of providing space and opportunity for us to do something which in the General Synod we are not always good at –namely, adapting to a changing reality creatively, courageously and decisively rather than reverting too quickly to a *status quo* which is more familiar and more comfortable.

My motivation, above all, is to see the people and the parishes of the diocese of Tuam develop, strengthen, grow and experience God's blessing. So I am seconding this Bill as a means of achieving greater effectiveness in mission, ministry and growth.

Of course I am aware that questions have been asked about the appropriateness of this Bill as a means of achieving this kind of positive outcome. Of the main problems I have heard expressed, time constraints will allow me to reflect on just two:

1. If, as the Bill proposes, for an interim period there were not to be a bishop of Tuam *in situ* who can argue the case for that diocese in the House of Bishops and elsewhere, does that not place the diocese at a disadvantage in any discussions about its future?

In response to this objection, I want to suggest that there is also a contrary view, which goes like this: If an Electoral College were to be called now, and a bishop were soon to be elected **and then** a time of consultation and examination of future episcopal needs of the diocese were to be embarked upon (an approach I have heard suggested by some), might it not be that it could become quite uncomfortable for that bishop if the gifts or strengths or priorities

which come to be identified as crucial for the future of the diocese were not to be found in any great abundance in that new bishop – someone who would most likely be in post for a number of years to come? Then how does the bishop, or the diocese, deal with that difficulty? So there *can be* an advantage in not having a bishop *in situ* when a period of consultation is being undertaken so that the discussion does not become personal or focused on the individual bishop who is in post.

So, providing some space and time, for a strictly limited period, *without* a bishop being in place could prove to be an advantage and would be made possible by this Bill.

A second question that has been posed goes something like this:

2. Rather than the Diocese of Tuam being allowed to decide for itself the way in which its episcopal needs might most appropriately be met in the future, it would be unhelpful if the initiative were to be taken by others, i.e. the General Synod, or the Standing Committee, or a Working Group, because the people of Tuam could then be open to the possibility of being dictated to by others.

This is an important point, and I want to respond to in a little more detail, with my response being informed by the work I have been part of as Chair of the Commission on Ministry.

Over the years, the diocese of Tuam has been strongly represented on the Commission on Ministry – our membership has included a Bishop of Tuam, a Dean and an Archdeacon from that diocese, as well as very able lay members. And I am certain that we are all the better for that, not least because one of the important themes we have been focusing on is Ministry in the West of Ireland. It has been recognized that there are particular challenges and opportunities in dioceses along the western seaboard, including in the Diocese of Tuam.

In recent years, one of the members from Tuam was The Very Reverend Sue Patterson, formerly Dean of Killala. In 2008 she researched and wrote an insightful piece of work for the Commission on Ministry entitled, *Missional Ministry in the West of Ireland*. A

summary of this document was printed in the General Synod Book of Reports, 2009 and the full version was made available on the Church of Ireland website.

In the 44 pages of her report Dean Patterson gave a detailed account of the particular challenges of ministry and mission in the West of Ireland, including in the Diocese of Tuam. She investigated the various demographic, political and economic factors which have influenced Church of Ireland life and membership up until the present.

Among her conclusions and recommendations, Dean Patterson made two points that are of specific relevance here. Firstly, she argued that change is required. To maintain the status quo in mission and ministry patterns is hardly an option, and included in this process she described the pivotal role that a bishop, as a leader in mission, must play in leading those changes.

Secondly, and this is important, she expressed the view that an individual diocese was, most likely, not in a position to make the changes required on its own, but would need the support, the involvement, the resources and the mind of the wider church to be involved.

Following on Dean Patterson's work, The Commission on Ministry's Report to the General Synod in May this year will contain another significant piece of work by the present Archdeacon of Tuam, The Venerable Gary Hastings. In it you will see that he, too, argues that maintaining the *status quo* of church life and ministry in the west – and most likely elsewhere, too, is not really an option. The situation has changed, society has changed, the church has changed, and therefore our approach to ministry and mission has to change as well. Courage is required to grasp this nettle, rather than to revert to the more comfortable and more familiar *status quo*.

The point I am making is that I have detected in the people of Tuam, perhaps more than in most other dioceses, a willingness to face the challenging realities of parish and diocesan life, to imagine the future more creatively, and to think deeply about viable ways forward. There is in that diocese a commendable recognition of the need to adapt.

The root problem remains, however, that to make the practical changes that are needed, to implement these imaginative ideas, can all become very, very difficult in practice. If there is any possibility of continuing with the status quo, even for another while, then that way forward becomes very attractive, and is the more likely option that will be chosen. This is a normal human response in all of us.

The purpose of this Bill is to enable the wider Church to support the Diocese of Tuam by sharing with them the weight of finding a way forward, of building on the good work they have already done, and in helping them take the tough decision, in grasping the nettle that they themselves have identified, rather than reverting to the easier and more familiar *status quo*.

Of course, this does raise important questions of trust. Can we trust one another to deal honourably and fairly with the proposed way forward? Can or should the diocese of Tuam trust the Standing Committee to choose the right people to be on the Working Group? Can they and we trust the Working Group to come up with wise and viable ways forward? Can we trust that God will guide us all in Synod to accept or reject the eventual findings of the Working Group? There are big questions of trust here, and I believe we have to be trusting as we go forward.

In conclusion, may I say this. I am aware that some people feel that the calling of today's Special General Synod, the wording of this Bill and the intervention by the House of Bishops are all unhelpful and unnecessary in this process.

For myself, I can only apologise if I have offended or irritated people by being part of this initiative. But I can only seek to assure members of the Synod that the motives in doing so are wholesome and honourable. Our Constitution does not allow much flexibility in dealing with issues like this and this is one of the few means of providing the space and the opportunity for us to pause and take stock, to ask important questions and to seek God's guidance about the way forward.

Whatever the outcome of this Special Synod, may we all continue, in unity, to know the guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit, and may the good people of Tuam in particular be strengthened and heartened as they move forward in faith and hope.

