

GENERAL SYNOD 2011

MOTION NO 4 – BOARD OF EDUCATION

**Proposing the first part of Motion 4 on Shared Education in Northern Ireland
Proposed by the Right Revd Ken Good, Bishop of Derry & Raphoe**

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

The two-part education motion before us today will also be presented to the forthcoming Presbyterian General Assembly and the Methodist Conference – a sign of how much the transferor churches work together on matters of education policy.

At this point I wish to commend to the Synod the first part of motion 4:

The General Synod of the Church of Ireland welcomes a public debate on the potential for shared education in Northern Ireland and encourages dialogue between schools and educational sectors with the aim of developing closer relationships through opportunities for collaboration and sharing.

Story of Paddy the Irishman, Englishman and Scotsman, who were each trying to get into the Olympic Games as spectators, but failed to get tickets for the main stadium, so they had to try some alternative and more inventive approaches.

Paddy the Englishman took a cannon-ball and got in by saying that he needed to get in to represent England in the shot putt.

Paddy the Scotsman took a long pole and gained access by claiming that he was representing Scotland in the pole vault.

Paddy the Irishman decided to gather up half a dozen wooden stakes and a couple of rolls of barbed wire and protested to the disbelieving official, 'But you see I'm representing Ireland in the fencing!'

It has not been unknown in the past for churches put up fences to separate themselves from others. Happily, these fences are now coming down in all sorts of ways as churches engage creatively with each other and with society. Historically, schools in Northern Ireland have also been separated from one another, and this Motion is about how we

might explore ways of taking down some of those fences or barriers between our schools and the pupils within them.

In recent months there has been a fresh debate on the nature of our divided school system in Northern Ireland. The First Minister, Peter Robinson, in a speech last October argued for the need for a single education system because he believed that educating children separately was ‘fundamentally damaging to society’. He proposed that a body be set up and tasked with bringing forward recommendations for a staged process of integration. Since then many educationalists and churches have grappled with his remarks and the topic of shared education has been thrust into the foreground of public discussion.

The issue also keeps being raised in discussions about how a divided society can be reconciled and about what role schools may play in any process of reconciliation? It is too simplistic to argue that schools have created the divisions – these divisions are a much complex interweaving of our society’s long history of religious and political conflicts. (Indeed, during those troubled years, schools consistently provided oases of calm where children continued to learn in peaceful settings). The structure of our schools’ system is, however, a reflection of our divided society with its separated housing and polarised communities. As a church with a major stake-holding in Controlled schools and as people called to be reconcilers, I believe we must be open to the future and seek new ways of enabling children from different communities to share in learning together.

Parents, of course, have a right to choose the type of school they prefer for their children, and many choose along traditional lines of a Catholic Maintained school or a Controlled school; a smaller number choose an integrated school. However my sense is that a growing number of parents in Northern Ireland are now beginning to think seriously about more creative approaches to the schooling of their children. We see it in a recent attitudinal survey about integrated education – a very high percentage of those polled said that integrated education was important in promoting a better and a shared future.

The formal Integrated sector will continue to have a role to play, but at a time of budget cuts it is more likely in the larger school sectors, Controlled, Maintained and Voluntary where the significant work of co-operation and sharing must be in greater evidence. Already at post-primary level, sharing is developing. The various learning communities

are working well and are enabling pupils at key stage 4 and post 16 to find shared access to courses where they may study with others in neighboring schools or colleges.

It is at primary level, perhaps, where the greatest challenges to working together remain. There is, I believe, a common ground which could shape our discussions about shared education. That common ground is that many parents, Protestant and Catholic, seek a learning context for their children that has at its core an ethos centred on the Christian faith. Is it not time then to be thinking more creatively around the concept of a shared Christian school?

A couple of years ago some representatives of the four churches and some school principals travelled to Liverpool to examine two joint church schools. These schools were jointly managed by the Church of England and Roman Catholic churches and were very impressive. While the school system in NI is not an exact match, I believe that with courage and creativity there may be places here where similar arrangements could work. This approach might be worth considering perhaps in a village where the existing Controlled and Maintained schools have declining enrolments and instead of closing the two schools and bussing children to two other schools in a local town, the two schools could come become one in an agreed way and preserve a local school with a clear Christian ethos.

This is just one creative solution which needs some thinking through but might just work in some settings. For other schools, sharing could also be about staying as they are but developing more shared resources, shared staff, shared space and shared facilities. All of this should be part of the discussion we need to have about sharing in the future.

Your Grace in your Diocesan Synod address last year you spoke of the necessity of developing shared education. I conclude with some of your remarks. You said *'Parents want schools with a Christian ethos but they want their children to have a wider experience and a wider respect for traditions other than their own. Can we not respond to that wish and seek to create links that have the power to draw separate institutions into an ever closer relationship of collaboration, respect and affection?'*

Coming back to where I began – it is time to engage further in dialogue in Northern Ireland and to be willing to take down some of those barriers, remove some of those

fences, between our schools and between the pupils who are at a very formative point of their lives – I ask Synod to support this motion.