

GENERAL SYNOD 2011

MOTION NO 4 – BOARD OF EDUCATION

**Proposing the second part of Motion 4 on Educational underachievement
Proposed by Revd Ian Ellis, Diocese of Dromore**

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Grace,

I wish to speak to the second part of motion 4:

The General Synod of the Church of Ireland strongly supports recent efforts to identify factors contributing to educational underachievement particularly among disadvantaged Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. The Synod calls for the identification of policy and practical measures to help address these issues.

The theme which joins these two motions is that of removing barriers to progress – the barriers to more shared education in the first and in this second motion the barrier of Educational underachievement – preventing too many pupils progressing and having better lives.

Underachievement has been around for some time and exists also in GB too; however it is only in recent years that we have been able to see a fuller picture of its nature and effects. Within the past year two studies have been undertaken - one a NI Assembly Education Committee *Inquiry into successful post-primary schools serving disadvantaged areas* and a second was a study by a group of educationalists and community workers into *Underachievement and the Protestant working-class*.

These reports and others tell that a growing number of working class Protestants, particularly boys are underachieving. In the year 2007-2008 in socially disadvantaged areas, just one in ten young Protestants went on to university compared to one in five young Catholics from a similar background. Also in that year 52% of Protestant boys were not achieving at least 5 A*-C GCSEs compared to 48% of Catholic boys.

In 2008 a PwC report identified reasons for this underachievement, including factors such as: a lack of parental involvement in their children's education, a perceived lack of value placed on education in certain areas, a shortage of positive role models, the impact of the troubles, and a decline in readiness for schooling in early years.

The reasons why underachievement is more of an issue on Protestant communities than in Catholic communities are complex. Some have suggested that disadvantaged Catholic communities had traditionally placed a greater emphasis on education. The loss of traditional labour markets and skills have been a factor affecting working class Protestants who had seen getting a trade as the main form of educational requirement.

These reports tend to agree that the solution is multi-faceted and will require a long term and wide ranging strategy by government. Measures include: more investment in early years education, better involvement of parents and local communities, supporting and rewarding exceptional teaching and leadership in schools, better coordination between different departments and further research.

As churches I think we would support such proposals and urge a new education minister to tackle this inequality as a priority. However schools alone will not be able to solve this problem; it is vital for the executive to undertake a comprehensive response across several government departments.

There is also I believe a role for the churches. In the TRC submission to this report we felt that the voluntary and community sector could be encouraged and resourced to work with the professionals. One possibility is to develop more provision of after-school activities, both those which directly complement the work of local schools (e.g. homework clubs) and those that will have an indirect, but equally important, contribution (e.g. youth club provision) that focuses on building self-esteem etc. I know that some parishes are already involved in some projects – we need more to join in particularly in urban settings.

There is also a need to develop programmes of work with parents to shift mindsets and attitudes to education this too could involve the churches and other voluntary groups. Perhaps there is a role here for our Mothers' Union and Young Families' workers.

This is not an insoluble problem - policy and practical measures will be needed by the Department of Education but there is a challenge for ourselves as well as for government

– do we care enough as churches to get involved in disadvantaged areas and see opportunities to serve? To reach out with the care and compassion of Christ: to volunteer to be governors of schools – especially schools in challenging areas, to offer our church facilities after school, and to find supportive ways of working with parents to help promote a desire for learning and the opportunities it brings.

This motion seeks a focussed response from the government and assisted by churches and other community groups, to begin to tackle this significant barrier of disadvantage which is preventing children, more often from our community, fulfilling their God given potential and finding a better future.

Your Grace, I ask Synod to support this motion.