

## COMMISSION ON EPISCOPAL MINISTRY AND STRUCTURES

### Report to General Synod 2013

#### *Membership*

1. In accordance with the Resolution passed by General Synod in 2012, the following persons are members of the Commission:
  - Three members of the House of Bishops: Rt Rev Michael Burrows, Rt Rev Harold Miller and Rt Rev Trevor Williams;
  - Two Honorary Secretaries: Ven Robin Bantry White and Mrs Ethne Harkness;
  - Mrs June Butler;
  - Rev Andrew Forster;
  - Ven Gary Hastings;
  - Mrs Hilary McClay;
  - Mr Andrew McNeile;
  - Very Rev Sandra Pragnell;
  - Very Rev Victor Stacey;
  - Mr Roy Totten;
  - A representative of the Methodist Church in Ireland: Rev Donald Ker (non-voting member);
  - A representative of the Roman Catholic Church: Most Rev Donal Murray (non-voting member).
2. At the first meeting of the Commission Mrs Ethne Harkness was elected Chairman.

#### *Summary*

3. The Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures was established by General Synod in 2012 to prepare proposals on the provision of episcopal ministry and structures adequate for the needs, and compatible with the resources, of the Church of Ireland. The Commission is to report to General Synod with conclusions and recommendations on appropriate future arrangements not later than May 2014. At that point, the General Synod may re-appoint, reconstitute or dissolve the Commission as it shall think fit. When it comes to the final scheme proposed, the powers and functions of Diocesan Synods under section 31 of Chapter 1 of the Constitution are vested in General Synod. Detailed Terms of Reference for the Commission are set out in the Schedule to the 2012 Statute.
4. The core task of the Commission is summed up in one short sentence in the Statute: “The mission of the Church shall be the focus of its work.” With this in mind, in a communiqué issued after its first meeting, the Commission stated as its aim:

“enabling the Bishops of the Church of Ireland to lead the Church in mission in the twenty-first century.”

5. The Commission has identified the following features that members believe General Synod would expect to see in proposals for episcopal ministry and structures:
  - a clear vision for the role and function of bishops;
  - structures that are suitable for the current situation, flexible enough to meet future demands and yet compatible with our resources;
  - support and resources that enable our bishops to fulfill the role required of them;
  - a workable and effective selection process.
6. There were four meetings of the Commission in 2012-2013, with additional meetings of informal sub-groups examining specific issues. The Commission has made significant progress in studying and discussing issues relevant to those core features noted above.

### ***Work in progress***

7. In beginning its task, the Commission adopted the analysis of the Working Group which reported to General Synod in 2012, with its emphasis on the theology, missiology and ecclesiology of the Church of Ireland as foundational elements for addressing the specific issues set out in the Terms of Reference. That approach has already gained the support of General Synod. Sub-groups have begun work in these three broad areas, with assistance from other persons with acknowledged expertise and drawing on material published by the Covenant Council and Joint Theological Working Party on the nature of episcopacy and the Faith and Order Group of the Church of England, amongst others.
8. Moving to more practical and administrative issues, similarly, work-strands have been allocated to members of the Commission and papers have been circulated and discussed. The particular questions to be considered by the Commission under the Statute are:
  - The key functions and roles of bishops;
  - Models of episcopacy;
  - Desirable skills of bishops and appropriate training;
  - Selection of bishops, including the role of electoral colleges;
  - Resources needed to support episcopacy and episcopal families;
  - Funding of episcopal ministry;
  - Diocesan structures and geographical boundaries;
  - Provincial structures and roles of Archbishops of Armagh and Dublin.

9. Work on these topics has not yet advanced to the stage where conclusions can be presented to General Synod 2013, but there has been substantial progress in studying some of them. This examination of specific issues has included focused papers and discussions on episcopal elections and appointments, funding arrangements for the episcopate, the desirable gifts, skills and experience of bishops and their development and training needs. Members of the Commission have conducted interviews with Bishops of the Church of Ireland in order to learn from their experience of episcopal ministry. Interviews with diocesan and central Church representatives and staff are planned.
10. General Synod 2012 directed the Commission to give early attention to three matters:
- Models of episcopacy allowing bishops to carry out other ecclesiastical roles;
  - Electoral colleges;
  - Provincial structures and the roles of archbishops.

The Commission has discussed the first two matters in depth. As regards the scope for bishops of the Church of Ireland to carry out other ecclesiastical roles, members have noted that the Constitution does not specifically preclude this at present but clarity is needed on the range of desirable and practical options and the structural, constitutional and financial implications. The Commission's approach is that ministry should be seen in the broadest sense and people may be called to episcopal ministry at a particular time and to another form of ministry at another time. It is therefore important that the models of episcopacy should be flexible enough to allow people to answer these calls. In relation to electoral colleges, the Commission has had detailed papers and marked certain issues for further consideration, including, for example, the size of electoral colleges, the timing of various steps in the process, the provision of information to members of the college, the importance of confidentiality throughout the process and, appropriate assistance and induction training for persons elected. The Commission is not yet in a position to make recommendations on this as further discussion and consultations are needed. Thirdly, whilst the question of provincial structures and the roles of archbishops has been raised in a number of contexts, the conclusion is that it would not be advisable to make recommendations in this area before a fuller picture of the proposed model of episcopacy has been developed. When a clearer definition of the roles and functions of bishops and their relationships with other Church structures has been agreed, there will be a firmer basis to return to this matter.

***The Commission's approach to its work***

11. In considering all these issues, both foundational and more specific, members of the Commission agreed that it was important to build upon available research and especially work done by earlier Commissions of the Church of Ireland. In particular, there are important insights and useful material in the Reports of the Commissions on the Episcopal Needs of the Church of Ireland set up in 1974 and 1995, both of which faced issues familiar to us: identifying core episcopal roles, balancing pastoral roles and administration, respecting our history, preserving the uniqueness and diversity of our episcopacy, sharing support functions, re-allocating or delegating tasks where appropriate, setting geographical boundaries and managing financial pressures. The two earlier reports have been placed on the website for Synod 2013.
12. The situation has changed since those days, however, and even where we appreciate the force of arguments made in the past, and see interesting parallels, we do not necessarily reach the same conclusions. The challenges and opportunities facing the Church of Ireland today and the context and culture in which we witness and communicate are different from previous generations. The time has come for careful review and reform.
13. The Commission has the responsibility of mapping these recent developments and proposing changes in episcopal ministry and structures to serve the new environment. In this regard, members of the Commission welcomed the decision of General Synod in 2012 to facilitate the collection and analysis of statistical information in and about the Church of Ireland. Data on residents in parishes and church attendance, including patterns and numbers at regular and special services and age profiles, will be invaluable in providing evidence to inform and support our recommendations in due course.
14. Members of the Commission have agreed also that the Commission must inform its deliberations by consulting widely throughout the Church of Ireland. To that end, it is intended that over the course of the next year there should be meetings and conversations with groups and individuals who want to share their opinions, experience and knowledge of episcopal ministry and structures with us. That engagement is already underway, with meetings with bishops, diocesan councils and secretaries and central Church bodies arranged or envisaged. Especially important and welcome to us will be the chance to hear the views of members of General Synod. We hope to facilitate wide participation and we look forward to constructive debate in 2013 and 2014.

***Conclusion***

15. The Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures has an exciting but demanding task ahead: to reflect upon the Scripture, build upon our heritage, and bring fresh perspectives to the episcopal needs of the Church of Ireland. Synod has given us a sense of urgency and an appreciation that the present arrangements are no longer appropriate or sustainable. At the next report to Synod, in 2014, there will be proposals, perhaps radical, surprising, enriching, contentious or affirming, presented for consideration. We trust that those proposals, with discussion and maybe amendment by Synod, will give the Church of Ireland an opportunity to step forward in faith as a confident Episcopal Church.