

Speech by Rev Malcolm Ferry (Derry diocese) seconding the General Synod Board of Education report.

Friday 10th May 2013

Archbishop and members of Synod

In seconding the report from the Board of Education I want to take this opportunity to commend the work of the full time staff who serve the wider church from the Belfast (and Dublin) offices and thank them for the way they execute their roles with proficiency and professionalism.

In particular I wish to highlight the work which falls under the title 'Safeguarding Trust' item 7 page 294 and I am delighted that this work has been supported and encouraged at the Standing Committee – and I quote from the March 2013 standing Committee report “it has become apparent that the role of Child Protection Officers has become vitally important and should be regarded as permanent.” The Standing Committee continued and agreed that “in future, reviews should focus on the role descriptions in the light of changing legislation and procedures, in particular the development of policy in respect of vulnerable adults.”

This I feel is most encouraging at central church level and in particular in respect of the care of those termed vulnerable adults. As the media highlighted over the past number of weeks in Northern Ireland, one group of vulnerable adults - the elderly - felt their views ignored and dignity trampled upon. However, they made their voices heard and remarkably caused the Minister of Health to halt the process of closure of state-run residential homes. As the population lives longer and parish ministry continues to see the demands of pastoral care to elderly grow - it is imperative that we as a church take seriously the challenges of this developing ministry. It is no longer sufficient to think of the house call and the private communions as the totality of our pastoral care to the elderly.

Parishes that are striving to seriously meet the needs of the elderly need to widen their field of vision and with the help of Board staff adopt the good practice within initiatives such as *Keeping Vulnerable Adults Safe*. We have also in recent years seen the government's *Care in the Community* policy help more and more adults with learning difficulties take their rightful place in the community as full participating members. If we are to move forward we must consider how this

impacts pastoral care, worship and inclusion of vulnerable adults in our parishes. I believe that the response we make to this challenge will have a significant impact on the future of parish ministry.

On the wider canvas of Education developments in Northern Ireland the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education recently published its report. The Group chaired by Professor Paul Connolly from Queen's University Belfast was tasked by the Minister of Education to explore and bring forward recommendations on how to advance shared education in Northern Ireland. The report made 20 recommendations most of them un-contentious.

As churches we have been supportive of existing school collaboration and shared education programmes for the educational benefit of the children. We also believe these programmes also assist in the vital work of promoting good relations and community cohesion. We agree that the most successful models of collaboration will take place and thrive when allowed to develop to reflect local needs and situations. One size will not fit all when it comes to shared education and collaboration.

The report did however touch on a contentious subject by recommending the removal of academic selection. The Press focused in on this aspect of the report and it became the key issue in public discussion and on the airways. However, opportunities to advance shared education could easily be missed if we waited until the discussion on academic selection had reached its conclusion. We would urge that the Report's recommendations be prioritised and that the Department bring forward those recommendations about sharing which do command wide community support. It is important that we encourage schools and communities to work towards what is achievable in the short to medium term.

Archbishop and members of synod it gives me great pleasure to second the adoption of the report of the Board of Education.