

GENERAL SYNOD 2013

Report of the Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures

Proposed by Mrs Ethne Harkness, Diocese of Armagh

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

The Report of the Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures is found at page 371 in the Book of Reports – the last Report in the collection.

In proposing this Report, first I say “thank you” to members of the General Synod for agreeing to suspend Standing Orders to allow us all to take part in an informal round table discussion session this afternoon. This was an innovation for General Synod and we hope it was a successful one. We will debate whether it worked or not in the Commission and in Standing Committee and more informally. Perhaps our organisation was not perfect and some will say we did not ask the right questions in the right way – but the Commission was keen to try this different way of communicating with members of General Synod.

The message of our first engagement with Synod is that we want to initiate debate, to encourage broader perspectives and new thinking, to listen to voices from all over the Church, to stimulate participation and respond to concerns. That is effective consultation and two-way communication. So thank you, Archbishop, and our thanks to General Synod members, for supporting us in doing that. We know the limitations of what has happened this afternoon but we also know its value and we will consider the words and ticked boxes and comments on all those blue and yellow forms carefully as we continue

our work in the Commission. We will follow up with reports online and through the media to share what we have learnt today.

To continue this theme of communication, later this year we hope to speak with interested people throughout the Church either in person at meetings or by electronic means. So members of Synod will see and hear more of the Commission. As well as learning from each other here, the Commission believes that we must not lose sight of the work, experience and insights of previous groups looking at these issues. Especially we commend the Reports of 1974 and 1995 and those have been placed on the website for this Synod for all of us to study. We will not replicate their recommendations but their analysis has a lot to teach us.

This is an interim Report: we have worked hard but it is too early for recommendations. We list particular issues Synod asked us to consider in paragraph 8, page 372. Among those issues, three were to be given early attention, so I will give a brief progress report on those. Health warning: I am not pre-empting recommendations here – just mentioning work in progress. It would be wrong to say we have settled views at this stage. Everything we touch has knock-on effects elsewhere. It is all interconnected.

The first issue is models of episcopacy allowing bishops to carry out other ecclesiastical roles. All our bishops already have a multiplicity of roles, but do we want to expand on that? In principle, our approach is for flexibility- but with constitutional clarity. So we can look at possibilities like:

- A Bishop in one diocese performing episcopal functions in another;
- A Bishop holding an incumbency;
- A Bishop acting as an honorary assistant bishop of another see;

- A Bishop having a role in addition to his or her diocesan duties – for example, as Head of Prison Chaplaincies, Head of Hospital Chaplaincies, Bishop to the Forces, perhaps a specialism role in education – school, university or college.

Whatever we recommend in this area, the Constitution should state the position clearly.

The second issue referred to us was electoral colleges. We have done a lot of work in this area, with much more to do, including examining how our arrangements compare with what other churches do. We have noted in the Report some areas for attention, including the size and membership of electoral colleges and the information made available before decisions are taken. We have concerns about speedy processes, especially the suddenness of announcements. We have linked into this discussion criteria for appointment, qualities and skills, and induction training, mentoring in the role and development. We are not in a position to make recommendations on these issues yet but we will have recommendations for Synod to consider next year.

Thirdly, provincial structures: we need to have a clearer picture of diocesan arrangements before we can say what changes may be appropriate as regards provinces and Archbishops.

As well as those areas, we have a programme of work scheduled for the next year. We have food for thought and new inspiration too, Archbishop, from your Presidential Address yesterday. It is clear that episcopal ministry matters to us in the Church of Ireland and beyond. Our Bishops are not regional managers of a big corporation. They are charged with leading the Church in mission in the twenty-first century. We are not discussing servicing the office of a chief executive - we are looking for structures that support ministry.

We know there are concerns – theological, practical and financial - and a sense of urgency. Yes – this is only an interim report but we are committed to the task. With a year of hard work ahead of us, we aim to bring a coherent set of recommendations for renewing episcopal ministry and providing effective and sustainable structures to Synod in 2014.