

GENERAL SYNOD 2013

Motion 20 – Motion for Special Bill in 2014 (Covenant Council)

Proposed by the Very Revd Nigel Dunne

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

As far back as 2005 the Covenant Council's report to the General Synod and Methodist Conference presented 'ten points' indicating the direction in which its discussions on interchangeability were heading. That report noted, 'We have reached substantial agreement on the points outlined below and we present these as the starting point for a major discussion on the issues'. Both Synod and Conference encouraged the discussion to move forward and in 2007 the Council tabled its first major interim statement entitled, 'Interchangeability of Ministry and Episcopate: Key Issues for the Churches' in which it was suggested that it might be possible to recognise episcopate (oversight) as existing within the existing structures of ministry in the Methodist Church in Ireland.

Following a strong endorsement from both Synod and Conference that year, a joint Interchangeability of Ministry Working Group made up of members of relevant committees of the General Synod and Methodist Conference was established which presented an interim report in 2009 and a full report and Agreed Principles in 2010. One of its key findings was to say, 'We have discerned consonance between the office and function of Presidents and Past Presidents of the Methodist Church in Ireland and in the

office and function of Bishops in the Church of Ireland based on the current doctrinal understanding and ecclesiology of both Churches.’ The warm reception of the Agreed Principles motivated the Council to move forward on the understanding that the interchangeability of ministry would be a very positive move towards full organic unity.

In 2011 the Covenant Council presented a ‘Second Statement on the Interchangeability of Ministry and Episcopate’ which set out the way forward. Two key areas, agreed by both Synod and Conference that year, were the recognition that it is the Methodist President wherein the historic episcopate had been, and continued to be, embodied and that as such the title, ‘episcopal minister’ be used to describe him/her.

The report also noted that this would not mean full organic unity, but that it will be a step on the way - ‘It is proposed that both churches will continue to operate their own ecclesiastical polities post-interchangeability for the time being. However, should a presbyter/priest from either polity take up a post in the other church, he/she will be deemed to be under the authority and regulations of that church.’

The Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland last year wrote in the term ‘episcopal minister’ to the consecration service for the President and made other small legislative changes to allow interchangeability to come about. The proverbial ‘ball’ now lies in the Church of Ireland’s court, and the proposed Canon 10A before you is designed to bring into effect that which has already been agreed in principle, not least at the General Synod of 2011.

This will allow Church of Ireland clergy and Methodist Church in Ireland ministers to take up posts in each other's churches. As such, this is one of the most significant ecumenical steps to be taken in recent years, and, no doubt, can only further strengthen the mission of the church in Ireland, which, after all, has to be the key motivator for this kind of ecumenical endeavour.