

GENERAL SYNOD 2014

COMMISSION FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY & DIALOGUE

Proposed by Bishop John McDowell, Bishop of Clogher

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Proposers Speech -CCUD Report GS 2014. Pages 345-352

Your Grace

The first thing that I want to do at the very beginning of this speech is to acknowledge the debt which the Commission and I believe the Church of Ireland in general owes to the Archbishop of Armagh who has been chair of the commission for the last five years.

Since taking over from him around the start of 2014 I have become all too aware of just how intimate is his knowledge of inter church bodies and inter church dialogue, not to mention ecumenical Theology. As a churchman and a theologian he represented the Church of Ireland with great energy and insight and brought a great deal of credit to our standing with other Christian traditions both in Ireland and abroad.

Taking over as chair of the Commission from the Archbishop was like replacing Rudolph Nureyev with John Sergeant- the archbishops elegant plies are much more engaging than my pedestrian buck-leps.

In the past six months I have also discovered that the Chair of the Commission on Unity and Dialogue is regarded rather like the Foreign Secretary is on the British Cabinet. To use a phrase from the colonial era- you are assumed to have " gone native" and generally become far too close to those other johnnies who believe funny things.

Of course that is not what the work of the Commission or ecumenical dialogue is about at all. To some extent it is just plain old fashioned getting to know people from a variety of faith backgrounds and to trust them. At a slightly deeper level it is about an acknowledgement that there is a possibility that we just might have misunderstood one another from time to time. Perhaps at its best and most creative it is rather like old friends looking at one another's family photographs and taking great pleasure in one another's family and in the pride each one has in their own offspring.

Perhaps too it is a recognition that what gives family life its interest and vigour is not what each member has in common but what makes each different. It is the variety and interplay of difference which creates a certain kind of family - a family which is always having to ask questions and wait patiently for answers.

Despite very close links early on it took a long time for Anglicans and Lutherans to come closer together and to try to understand one another better, but the Porvoo Communion of churches is doing that. It is on a modest scale and involves a relatively small number of people and parishes within the Church of Ireland but it has limitless possibilities for those who want to engage, and I know that our contact person, Archdeacon Helene Steed, would be only too willing to facilitate further links and contacts.

Two new members from the Lutheran side will sign the Porvoo Common Statement in the Autumn of this year and one of these (the Evangelical Lutheran Latvian Church Overseas) has been able to use the Porvoo Communion as a way of healing wounds and difficulties with its mother Church inflicted during WW2 and Soviet occupation. The accession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Great Britain also strengthens the strong relationship which it already has with the Church of England. We should be proud to be part of that family and that the Archbishop of Dublin has been elected as the Anglican co-Chair.

In many ways Porvoo has been a model and an inspiration for dialogue and closer working relationships nearer to home. Through Porvoo we have learnt not to let anomalies become insuperable stumbling blocks. No two bodies which have any real life in them will ever develop in exactly the same way but very often it is the same spirit at work in them. It is hardly inconceivable that the spirit might want me to do one thing and you to do another.

I will not say anything other than a general hurrah about the historic developments in our relationship with the Methodist Church in Ireland, as this will be the subject of discussion elsewhere, but in our discussions with representatives of the Moravian Church we have been greatly encouraged by the many points of common theology, order and liturgy. Also at a time when we are examining our own episcopal practice and structures it has been interesting to meet and to share with bishops whose role is not unlike that of bishops in the ancient Celtic Church.

It can be difficult to interest busy people in parishes in inter church projects or dialogue. However contact with those of other Christian traditions is an explicit part of the mission of the Church. It can be painfully slow and sometimes unrequited, but it springs from a

generous impulse of the gospel that difference need not mean division, and that unity should not mean uniformity.

If it is difficult to interest busy people in inter church projects, it is harder still to interest them in inter-faith activities. In that sense the Inter-Faith Working Group of the Commission has achieved a great deal in sustaining a series of conferences and dialogues around the country that have at the very least been expressions of theological hospitality in the sharing of ideas and cultural exploration. We are very grateful to them for their commitment and originality.

If I could finish by drawing your attention to the work of another group who in many ways provide the Church of Ireland and many other Christian traditions in Ireland with what might be called the bread and butter of ecumenical work- that is the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Inter Church Meeting.

The Church of Ireland again should be proud that it was a founder member of the ICC in 1923 and has remained a committed member through all of the difficult years that have followed. Membership of the ICC and IICM brings us into regular formal contact with the large traditional Churches and also, with some of the newer, largely African, Pentecostal Churches which frankly many of us would have no knowledge of otherwise.

It also helps us to maximise our involvement with bodies such as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and the Conference of European Churches. Indeed it is only by working with these bodies that we can have our views taken into account by the world wide Church. In that regard it was very gratifying to note that the Bishop of Connor has been elected to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, thereby maintaining a long history of Church of Ireland involvement.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of bodies in all Churches which carry out task is similar to the Commission is to have made critical and friendly relationships between the Churches the norm. It is not that the day of "institutional churches" has gone (healthy institutions are still very important) but that relationships are conceived on a much broader spectrum and the idea of the strength of variety is accepted very widely.

It may appear to be an alphabet soup of working groups and forums and meetings, but the work of the Commission continues year by year as an honest engagement with our spiritual brothers and sisters and with all people of goodwill who wish to live in peace and understanding.

I have much pleasure in commending the Report of the Commission on Dialogue and Unity.