

GENERAL SYNOD 2014

MOTION 8 & 9 – COVENANT COUNCIL

Proposed by The Revd Dr Maurice Elliott, Diocese of Dromore

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Archbishop, Members of Synod,

We have all experienced those theatrical, and sometimes comical, moments when the character on stage is earnestly looking in one direction only to discover that the real action was all the while going on somewhere else. And it is that analogy which I think needs to challenge all of us in relation to this year's report of the Covenant Council (CC).

With the ongoing process yesterday and again tomorrow of passing legislation for full interchangeability of ministries between the COI and MCI, there is a danger that we allow ourselves to think that the main event is currently elsewhere and for consideration of these few pages in the actual report to become something of a side-show. Such a perspective would, however, be a misreading of the reality.

Whereas the long-awaited moment of full interchangeability is now tangibly close, and this is without doubt a goal that the CC has sought to promote since its inception in 2002, this is but one facet of the Covenant overall. Whilst the legislation and its attendant choreography is vitally important, it remains very much the mind of the Council that if the Covenant is ultimately to count for the kingdom, then it needs to move beyond that which is structural and institutional to that which can more readily facilitate the local and the missional.

For this reason, M of S, the CC genuinely rejoices in every instance of where the living and breathing and felt outworking of the Covenant is able to find meaningful expression:

- *p. 342 details the ongoing encouragement of Church on the Hill at Maghaberry outside Lisburn where a fully united congregation is now governed by a single Covenant Leadership Council of 12 people plus the ministry team. Last week I took the opportunity to chat this over in more detail with Rev Carlton Baxter and his emphatic view is that it has come about as a result of a considerable effort in prayer and a considerable enthusiasm for mission over many years. Communion is now shared according to the rite of the presiding minister, the monies of each church have been merged into a single account and my understanding is that the MCI has in fact gifted half of the property to the COI. One of the church members who has been instrumental in achieving this is Mr Harold Giboney, the local treasurer, whose name is to be proposed to Synod for Council membership. Mr Baxter describes him as 'a fine man of outstanding integrity and with a real passion for what God is doing in Maghaberry'.*
- *In CITI we are actively looking forward to the annual shared Integrated Seminar in two weeks' time and also tentatively considering the possibility of shared visit by staff and students to Rome in the autumn of 2015. At a personal level I will have the privilege of addressing the Methodist 'Headway Society' during this year's Conference in Dublin next month.*
- *In Bangor and in Monkstown the schemes continue to thrive, and in QUB the chaplaincy project has now moved beyond that which is 'joint' to that which is genuinely 'united'. If you contact the chaplaincy, you will be welcomed to the 'COI Methodist Student Centre', and as from the Methodist Conference meeting Rev Barry Forde is to be designated as sole chaplain for both denominations. Huge credit for this progress must be given to all involved locally, and especially to the support of both the Bishop of Connor and the Rev Donald Ker.*

The CC is keen to see local initiatives such as these continue and increase, and one such opportunity may arise under the suggestion of different date for Covenant Celebration. Hitherto this has been annexed to the Sunday nearest to the original date of signing, but

as with virtually anything across the COI in late September and early October this was constantly having to defer to Harvest services. The new suggestion, for which a motion is also attached to the Report, is that such local celebrations might be encouraged around 24 May, the already designated 'John Wesley Day', and indeed there are certain liturgical resources already available towards this possibility.

Since the submission of this report for publication the work of the CC, through a small working group, is also now seeking to sponsor the commencement of a major discussion between our two churches in relation to mission across Ireland. A number of years ago in 2008 the CC initiated a high profile Mission Conference in Dublin, with a speaker from each tradition, which at the time garnered significant attendance and interest. It is anticipated that through the suggestion of a further shared conversation between our respective Mission Councils the time may now be right, in the light of impending interchangeability, for some other such initiative.

In the matter of membership, and as already mentioned, we are pleased to propose the name of Mr Harold Giboney in place of Mr Cyril McElhinney. Cyril has been a stalwart member and has served the Council since its inception. He was one of the instigators of the earlier Mission Conference and has been active in his willingness to make visits to shared projects beyond Council meetings. In proposing his successor we place on record our gratitude for Cyril's sterling contribution.

Also on this matter there is to be a change in the Anglican Co-chair. Subject to Synod's approval we look forward to welcoming the Bishop of Connor, but in so doing we are sorry to losing the wisdom, the drive and, on many occasions, the wit of the Primate. It has been an immense privilege for the CC to have had the benefit of his involvement, not least through the key period for hoped-for interchangeability during the past few years, and it is in no small measure thanks to him that as a church we find ourselves at this exciting moment. Thank-you Archbishop.

Finally, there is to be one other change of personnel with a new Presbyterian observer. We again express our gratitude to Rev Denis Campbell for his contribution and are awaiting the nomination of his successor from PCI in the near future. This has particular significance in the light of current developments within the wider ecumenical world where efforts are now happening, further to a resolution at the most recent meeting of the ACC, for a formal re-establishment of international Anglican-Reformed dialogue. In the Irish context this has special relevance and especially as there are existing shared ministry schemes between the MCI and PCI.

Abp, I have pleasure in proposing that this year's report of the CC be taken into consideration.