

## General Synod 2015

### Commission on Diocesan Ministry and Structures: Motion 16 on Diocesan Boundaries

***“That General Synod welcomes the general principles, analysis and approach to diocesan restructuring outlined in paragraphs 26-32 inclusive in the report of the Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures, acknowledges a need for structural change and requests the Commission, following consultation with the Diocesan Councils, to bring a Bill for reorganisation to the next General Synod.”***

**ETHNE HARKNESS, DIOCESE of ARMAGH**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

Archbishop,

Earlier today members of Synod considered the report of the Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures and a motion on the election process. We turn now to one specific aspect of the work of the Commission – geographical diocesan boundaries. We bring this to Synod in paragraphs 26-32 of the report and the booklet, *“Opening the Discussion”*.

Synod in 2012 gave the Commission a job to do and we have worked hard on your behalf to get to this point. Having listened to voices across the church, we now set before you our approach to this question. We ask members of Synod to engage constructively with us and to acknowledge with us that there is a need for change in diocesan boundaries if we are to equip the church better for mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and enable our bishops to be leaders in that mission. We do not argue for any particular geographical change but in the booklet we give some examples of where a principled approach may take us, grounded in the prayer that our generation should find courage, imagination and energy and hand on a strong, confident and secure church to our children and grandchildren.

We believe that the present arrangements do not support a meaningful and effective episcopal ministry for all our 12 bishops. Yet that ministry, as envisaged in the Ordinal, is what members of the General Synod and Diocesan Synods have asked for and what the Commission seeks to provide. At present, many of our bishops, clergy and laity put huge effort into maintaining their diocese. Some people (not just bishops) carry a disproportionate load of administration at the expense of other aspects of their ministry. Some very committed and dedicated people struggle to keep up with multiple demands, in a way that is not sustainable in the longer term. We must break out of structures that no longer meet the needs of those in the church pews, let alone those outside. We must allow the focus of the Church of Ireland to move from palliative care for a patient in decline to nourishing growth and hope for the future.

The Commission has examined possible scenarios apart from reducing the number of dioceses. We always come back, however, to the concept of a diocesan bishop exercising oversight, as pastor to the pastors, but with support and resources to allow him or her to carry out the core elements of that calling. Fewer bishops but bigger mileage – we know that’s not the answer. Instead, changes in structures, including boundaries, and changes in episcopal ministry – in what we call bishopping – can together create new opportunities for ministry and mission.

The Commission's statement of *Vision and Principles* has gained acceptance in wide consultation. It includes the ten *Principles* on page 2 of the booklet. We have used those *Principles* to develop *Working Guidelines* also set out on that page. We think that the range of skills and expertise needed to support a diocese is not likely to be available where the population is very small. We suggest it is reasonable to set a figure of around 15,000 Church of Ireland members as the level appropriate to give that capacity and, using the census data, that represents 2,500 worshippers in about 30 cures. Those are not inflexible targets, but reasonable estimates for sensible forward planning. (As it happens, the figure of 30 cures originally came to us in a paper from the House of Bishops and we examined it carefully and agreed to adopt it as a working guideline.) That is not to say that size is the only measure of effectiveness or sustainability, because every diocese, big or small, faces its own challenges, but matters of scale and resources are always relevant. So, if not 30 cures then what? Do we go below 20 or 10? Is there no minimum?

None of us on the Commission has any illusions about this. We are realistic, not naïve or foolish. We know setting up new structures will be hard, but with a good implementation plan, it will be worth the effort. The Church has faced the same questions about structures before and ducked the difficult decisions. There are always reasons to do nothing. Some of them are arguments of substance and we want to hear and assess the merits of those, please. On the other hand, some are negative, selfish or complacent.

Some have told us there is no appetite for change: people want no change at all, or want change but only for other people, or "I want change but only on my terms". We should leave well alone, people can manage. Archbishop, is that the way to build the church of the future? If we continue to ask clergy and laity to spend more and more time and effort on keeping the present system going, then that means less can be devoted to mission.

Some might say, "This diocese is small but perfectly formed. We know how things work, it suits us all." Is that a valid, evidence-based assessment or is it self-centred complacency?

Some say, "This is about saving money." No – our proposals are not money-driven. If there are savings, they should be rerouted into support for ministry, so that bishops can be released from some tasks to enable them to concentrate on their core roles.

Some say, "This is withdrawal from the West." No- it is about building strong dioceses to support mission in all parts of the church.

Archbishop, with the results of the 2013 census, this time we have to face reality. It is not all right now. The next step for the Commission is to listen today and then ask Diocesan Councils for their views. After consideration, we will bring recommendations to General Synod in the form of a Bill in 2016 and the final decision will be made there, not here and not now. That will only happen, however, if Synod today requests us to prepare such a Bill by approving this motion. We do not want to spend church resources in proceeding along these lines if there is not support for the Commission's principles, analysis and approach or if there is not acknowledgment of the need for structural change in diocesan boundaries. For those reasons, we submit this motion.

Ethne Harkness