

# GENERAL SYNOD 2016

## Report of the Church of Ireland/Methodist Covenant Council Proposer: The Revd Barry Forde

**Embargoed Against Delivery  
Check Against Delivery**

Your Grace

Every year at Synod the caption competition provides some light relief and a little reward. Well, this year I want to offer up a quote from a Covenant Council meeting in 2005 shared by a then member of the House of Bishops and allow Synod to guess who said it! The winner will get a copy of *'The Journey so Far'*, signed by the author, the Revd Peter Thompson.

The line was this:

“Ecumenism is full of over-crowded shop windows and no-one looking after the counter”.

We need to ask: “Is this true of the 2002 Covenant?” We have had the wonderful shop window moment of confirming interchangeability at both Synod and Conference. We have had the participation of bishops and presidents at the installation and consecration of the other, and there are signs and pockets of life in different places – Monkstown, Movilla, Maghaberry, chaplaincy in Belfast, Primacy in Bangor, the relationship between CITI and Edgehill.

It is wonderful to celebrate symbolic moments, and never to underestimate the power of symbol, but we have to make sure that there is substance forming behind the show. That we are attending to the counter as well as to the window.

The report before Synod highlights some key areas that we need to address and some of the steps being taken, and proposed to be taken, to action these.

First, at the instigation of Covenant Council there will now be a meeting of representatives of the House of Bishops, Conference, Home Missions and the Methodist President two or three times a year.

The aim is to develop strategic engagement, raise the visibility of the Covenant, respond to, and instigate areas of work for, Covenant Council. Such areas include:

- a) Putting into place polities and protocols to enable interchangeability to work in practice. How might one cleric end up working in the other tradition? What steps are required? How might such an appointment happen?
- b) How can we work together in the arena of lay readers and local preachers, providing recognition of the other and considering how to better work together?
- c) How might our theological colleges continue to grow together?

- d) What areas of mission are there across the island that might be better served by working together?

These are but some of the issues and needs that are before us.

Second, Covenant Council believe it is important to revisit our Constitution and the Manual of Laws in order to facilitate the expressions of church that are growing in covenant together, and to make new expressions possible. Previous protocols were considered by Synod and Standing Committee in 2006, but at that time interchangeability was not in effect and it was felt that work was needed on our constitution on a range of issues. Well, interchangeability is now in effect. The shop window has its poster, its display, and our churches have no reason or excuse to do anything other than revisit and make active constitutional provision for covenant partnerships. At this juncture it is worth making a brief comparison with the situation in England. In England, a similar Covenant was signed at or around the same time as our own. It was believed that interchangeability would follow shortly thereafter, but the most recent, and final report of the Joint Implementation Commission in 2014 regrets that this has not yet happened. However, in the years before and during the Covenant in England canonical provision and protocols for local ecumenical partnerships created space for such projects to emerge. In the same 2014 report it was highlighted how over 500 local ecumenical partnerships are now in existence.

There is a marked contrast with Ireland. We have had the shop window moment but have not attended to the counter, and as such have not made it clear how such partnerships might actually look and work on the ground. Ecumenism will work from the ground up, but it is imperative that we do all we can to facilitate those who want to work together but who are often confused about how to make it happen. With the proposed revision to the constitution, Covenant Council encourages, and will continue to press for, much clearer provision to be made for covenant partnerships, alongside other expressions of church that should be allowed to sit alongside traditional models as we seek to grow the mission of the church of God.

We encourage Synod to stay on the journey of the Covenant. It was Synod that boldly encouraged interchangeability through each stage of reporting and then the introduction and passing of the Bill. We encourage Synod to help Covenant Council attend to the counter of ecumenism as well as the shop window so that there is actual strength, depth and substance to our Covenant under God. Chair, I propose that the report of Covenant Council be received.