

**GENERAL SYNOD 2007**

**BOARD OF EDUCATION**

**Seconded by the Venerable Stephen Forde, Diocese of Connor**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Your Grace and Members of Synod,

in seconding the Report of the General Synod Board of Education, my task is to focus your attention on the report of the Northern Ireland Board, found on pages 292 to 295 of your Book of Reports.

However, I am sure that the more sharp eyed among you will have noticed an error at the top of page 292. It reads DRAFT General Synod Report 2007. Yet on this morning when devolved government is to be restored at Stormont, and a locally elected Minister of Education, Catriona Ruan, is to take up her portfolio, the word “draft” is more than appropriate. The far reaching education reforms which have been proposed over the past year under direct rule, must now be debated, received and finally agreed by the MLA’s and Minister at Stormont.

The field of Education in Northern Ireland has been subject to a period of unprecedented change, with the Review of Public Administration, the Bain Report and the Northern Ireland Education Order of July 2006. Let me touch briefly on some of their more important aspects.

In the area of Education, the review of Public Administration proposes to abolish the 5 current Education and Library Boards. They are to be replaced by one single Education and Skills Authority (ESA). From the Churches’ perspective, this change has far reaching consequences. Under the present system of education management, the churches (including the Church of Ireland) transferred their parochial schools to

the Northern Ireland state under the 1947 legislation. Since then they have had a right of representation on both the Education and Library Boards, and on local school boards at primary and secondary level for schools within the “Controlled Sector”. Under the new proposals, transferors will have no right of representation on the Education and Skills Authority which is to replace the Area Boards. Simultaneously, by an application of Equality Legislation, the transferor churches have been informed that they will lose the right to nominate transferor representatives to most local school boards. This is a position which the Transferors’ Representative Council (the TRC) considers must face independent legal challenge.

Yet this proposal to remove transferors’ representatives, with their track record for long term commitment and clear heading thinking, comes at the very time when local schools are asked to embrace the concept of “maximised supported autonomy”. What does that mean? It means local school board members taking more local responsibility for more areas of school management!

This begs a fundamental question: **Is our Church of Ireland involvement with education based only on historical precedent, or is it because of a Gospel imperative to shape the society we live in?** Because it is the nature, content and ethos of our education which shapes the citizens we become, and the society we create. And this question is as important for society in the Republic as in Northern Ireland.

The answer to this question will shape our response to the proposed areas of reform.

The Bain Review reported in February 2007. This review concluded that a multiplicity of education sectors in Northern Ireland is not only financially wasteful, but it also works against the best provision of quality education for all children. Although the media have focused on pupil enrolment numbers for “sustainable schools”, and the “review” proposals for smaller primary and secondary schools, less

attention has been given to the important proposal for “Local Area Planning” across school sectors, or to the concept of developing “extended schools” to counteract smaller pupil numbers.

The Northern Ireland Education Order of July 2006 proposed far reaching changes to the school curriculum and educational entitlement. But the issue of academic selection remains controversial, and it will be one of the most challenging decisions to face the new locally elected Minister of Education.

Coming nearer to home, the appointment of Ms Margaret Yarr as the Child Protection Officer with responsibility for Northern Ireland is a welcome move. Already she has begun to develop her role, giving advice, support and guidance to parishes, dioceses and at a central church level. Margaret has been present here in Kilkenny over the past three days.

Members of Synod, the wind of change blows strongly across all aspects of Education in Northern Ireland. Whether our church considers this wind to be a cold draught, or a welcome change of direction, depends upon the role in education which this church chooses for itself.

Members of Synod, I present to you, not the “draft” report, but the final report of the Northern Ireland Board of Education for your consideration.