

**GENERAL SYNOD 2007**

**The Board of Education – Northern Ireland Report, page 292**

**The Right Revd Dr Michael Jackson**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

The Report of The Board of Education NI is correct to begin with the review of Public Administration and to characterize this review as the most extensive and radical of its kind since the 1970s. To set the debate about provision for education within this review concentrates our minds on an opportunity for developments in education which has not been there before. It is vital that this opportunity be grasped – and quickly. Since the Costello proposals for post-primary arrangements and now the Bain review of the schools' estate, there has been much confusion about the future direction of primary and secondary provision, including access to secondary education. There is also insufficient information about the administrative structure which will replace the Library Boards of now. One thing is becoming increasingly clearer: what we take for granted today will in all probability not exist in its present form in five years' time.

Northern Ireland is becoming a new society which needs a sustained local economy capable of encouraging people educated locally to remain and to contribute right across the country to this society, with the strengths which local knowledge and commitment bring. It also needs to be attractive enough to encourage sustained inward investment and immigration. In these ways, it will become the vibrant, responsible and progressive society for which it has all the potential, taking its place internationally in a way denied to it throughout the Troubles and their immediate aftermath. Economics and politics are not by any means the only components in a responsible, caring and generous society, but they have the potential to reintroduce a sense of stability and confidence into a society which is learning rapidly to come to terms with its new self in a new era.

Both curriculum and a clear sense of school ethos are vital to this tremendously exciting future. What will facilitate the delivery of an imaginative and relevant curriculum is collaborative thinking and co-operative action across the educational sector. The new society will rest on an economy serviced by people whose expectations, values and skills are fashioned within such a new curriculum. This is the opportunity which we in the Church of Ireland need to grasp. It means that radical decisions will have to be made, often involving significant sacrifices. Right across the sector, the best interests of the pupils must remain uppermost, as the Board of Education NI has consistently maintained in its responses to proposals for new arrangements for schools in NI.

The opportunity is being offered to us by Government. It will be as good as the use we make of it – for the pupils of today and of the future. I am acutely conscious of this in the Fermanagh and Tyrone area where, as elsewhere in Northern Ireland, this thinking has already begun to happen. We are very aware that education too often leads to emigration and to the loss to us of people whom we want to see returning. As this year's Report goes on to express it: 'This is a crucial point in the history of church involvement in education in NI; it is an opportunity to enable churches to reaffirm their historic link with schools and to strengthen that relationship for the future.'