

**GENERAL SYNOD 2007**

**CHRISTIAN UNITY COMMITTEE**

**Proposed by the Bishop of Meath and Kildare – Most Revd Dr Richard Clarke**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

I would like to tackle two things in one speech..

The first is to explain why, at this particular moment, we should now be looking at a re-structuring of our way of promoting Christian unity at central Church level - *and I would be the first to say that, certainly when it comes to action rather than words, central Church level is not necessarily the most elevated level of the Church* - and then to go on to explain briefly some of the details of what we are asking General Synod to run with..

In talking about a re-structuring, I would like - as someone who has just parachuted into the chair of the Christian Unity Committee - to begin by thanking on behalf of all of us the many people who have remained committed to a vision of Christian unity through many years. Nothing planned at this point is anything more than continuing of that vision but with a realisation - shared by many of those who have carried the torch - that we have very suddenly moved into very different times on this island, and that the means through which we head into the future of a shared and united proclamation of Jesus Christ must be looked at afresh.

In particular I would like to express the gratitude of the Committee and of the wider church to Revd Daniel Nuzum who has, with great aplomb and energy, acted as honorary secretary of the Christian Unity Committee over several years, and also to the Bishop of Clogher who generously took over the chair of the committee last year on a temporary lease, but who has given a tremendous lead and encouragement in all that is before you today.

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It is truism to say that the Republic of Ireland is now both more secularised, and more multi-cultural and multi-faith than would have seemed conceivable a decade ago. It is said - perhaps less often but with equal truth - that Northern Ireland is not only politically but also culturally, ethnically and religiously, a very different place than even five years ago. In such a setting of change, uncertainty and even bewilderment, it is more than ever essential that a real and active *pursuit* of the goal of Christian unity should move up the conscious and unconscious agenda of the Church of Ireland. It is therefore crucial that dialogue between different faiths and even a constant appraisal of the continuing pilgrimage of the Anglican Communion and its Porvoo cousins should all be essentially

*proactive*, rather than being *reactive* to outside events and to the ideas and the work of others. If we let the ecumenical venture, inter-faith dialogue, or the complex relationships within Anglicanism just *drift*, it is towards ecclesiastical irrelevance that we will be sleepwalking ourselves.

Society – far more secularised and far less tolerant of religious faith *per se* than ever before – looks at us all, and sees at best squabbling siblings and at worst viciously competing barons in their rival and fast disappearing fiefdoms, and society reasonably assumes that it must all be nonsense.

Forty years ago, one of the great catchphrases of the whole ecumenical project was Pope John XXIII's call to *aggiornamento*, literally a bringing into the present, but by implication also a journeying, and *a journeying together*.. Yes, it became a tired cliché of the 1960s but perhaps its time has now returned. But to travel on a journey with real purpose is never a reactive matter, something we may assume will happen even if we do not put effort and planning and enthusiasm into it.

I do not believe that we will achieve as much as we wish as quickly as we might wish.

- But I would hope that the Church of Ireland - placed in a wonderful position to do it - may be a real catalyst in a new injection of urgency into the ecumenical adventure, and may give a place at the heart of the Church's central agenda to the ecumenical project, and so encourage all that is being done - here and abroad, locally and nationally - to bring closer a unity not politely requested, but commanded by Christ.
- I would hope that the imperative need for greater understanding between those of different faiths may become something with which everyone in the Church may become knowledgeable and enthused because they need to be.
- I would hope that the Church of Ireland may have a proactive, shrewd and well thought-out contribution to the future of world Anglicanism.

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Now to the details of what we ask today.. The resolution before General Synod recognises first of all, in a new title, the important distinction between the aims and goals ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue, hence the suggestion that we are a commission – founded on the commission of Christ himself to unity and peace – The Church of Ireland Commission for Christian Unity and Dialogue. The Committee already has responsibility for inter-faith matters (given to it by General Synod) but this was not entirely clear in the title for the committee.

We are also, we hope, adding a new area to the work of the Commission - that of intra-Anglican relationships, the relationships between Anglicans - not because we wish to intrude into the work of

Standing Committee which may at times have separate or complementary responsibilities in this area (and we are clarifying this with a suggested amendment to the original resolution), but so that the work may be more proactive, as well as being primarily reactive to requests from outside the Church of Ireland for responses to the reports and proposals of others. Consequently we hope to include on the intra-Anglican working group all those who are already involved in Anglican matters beyond these shores, including in particular our ACC representatives and Porvoo contact persons.

We intend, as a new departure therefore, to model the commission more along the lines of the Church in Society Committee where working groups are more *pliable* than we are perhaps used to in the Church of Ireland. People may come and go and give expertise as required without being vacuumed in for a lifetime of everyday labour in the work of committees. This makes energetic and proactive innovation a real possibility.

I would ask for the support of Synod, not simply in the effecting of a re-structuring of the Church's mission to Christian unity at organisational level, but also in the daily, local and ongoing work of what is surely to be a great adventure for the future of the entire Church's life and its witness to Jesus Christ.