

GENERAL SYNOD 2007

COMMITTEE FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Seconded by Dr Kenneth Milne

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Grace,

It sometimes seems to me that we in church circles are rather better at proffering advice to others than at following it ourselves. Certainly we have always urged upon those engaged in political matters to talk to each other, to take risks, and to think of their constituents rather than of themselves, while at the same time we ourselves have not infrequently shown a certain reluctance to seek and seize opportunities for progress where our relations with other churches are concerned.

Ecumenism has been described by some people as being at the present time in the doldrums. Others have spoken of a climate reminiscent of winter, as compared with the spring-like days of the 1960s. There is much truth in such assessments of our present ecumenical situation, though we have much to be thankful for, when we compare inter-church relations to-day, at both institutional level and personal level, with what it was like fifty years ago. Anyway, more profitable than to curse the darkness, as it were, would be to turn the spotlight on ourselves, and ask: to what extent are we as individuals responsible for how things are ecumenically? And we might also well ask: how far has

the Church of Ireland fallen short of what might have been reasonably expected of us? The Bishop of Meath and Kildare, in proposing our motion, addressed our responsibilities as a church. Our committee by no means regards itself as blameless in these matters. We have, as we admit in our report, been less pro-active than we might have been. And the bishop has outlined the steps that we wish to take to remedy that situation.

There is, as we have often heard quoted, a tide in the affairs of men (Shakespeare was blissfully ignorant of political correctness) and we on the outgoing committee sense that today may be an appropriate time for new energy to be put into ecumenical affairs.

This may be in part due to the new political situation in Northern Ireland, where energy that was for so long absorbed by political issues is now released for new initiatives. Though, as we were reminded at the recent AGM of the Irish Council of Churches, whatever about the hope attaching to new political departures, community tensions remain, and are in some senses heightened. So perhaps there is a new urgency about ecumenism.

In the Republic of Ireland, a society that is changing so fast that religious and moral terms of reference are not easily discerned, it surely equally behoves us to remove the disunity that is such a cause of scandal, and which frustrates the effectiveness of what Christians have to say.

Both north and south, we live in societies that have, where ethnic origin is concerned, changed vastly from what they were a generation ago. That being the case, as you can see from our report, inter-faith dialogue is an imperative, though we must not, of course, take our eye off the ecumenical ball and we must, of course, look wider than our own island, and not least to Europe.

While the concept of European unity is regarded with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the members of the Church, (and, perhaps it should be added, with varying degrees of misunderstanding) surely the manner in which inter-state relations on the continent have been transformed by the development of the European Union must carry a message for those of us who are concerned about inter-church relations. Not that there haven't been considerable achievements, Porvoo for instance; but we need to take more seriously to heart the opportunities for increased contact and conversation between churches provided by the new age that has come into being.

A friend who works in Brussels told me once that when the bureaucracy, the petty squabbling, and the other less attractive sides of the EU begin to get him down, he finds it a salutary exercise to drive to the military cemeteries of Flanders and to gaze on the tens of thousands of graves, stretching as far as the eye can see. He says that it helps to restore his sense of proportion. While we may like to think that the conflicting ideologies that resulted in such carnage were political, not religious, that would be, first of all, to forget that in earlier centuries wars of religion created similar carnage, and to ignore the havoc that religious tensions still do create- on our planet.

All in all then, the General Synod entrusts to this committee some very urgent responsibilities, perhaps of an ecclesiological nature at first glance, but when considered more closely, of enormous importance for the future well-being of our country and the world. We believe that if the committee is to measure up to what is demanded of it, then new structures are required. It is, I know, a not unfamiliar administrative tactic to avoid uncomfortable issues by blaming the structures, without addressing the difficulties that need to be tackled. But may I assure the house that it is our firm belief that the changes that we are proposing are necessary, and that time is running out.

And so your Grace, I have pleasure in seconding the motion that.....