

Archbishop Alan Harper's Presidential Address to General Synod for your information.
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CHURCH OF IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD 2007

THE LYRATH ESTATE HOTEL, KILKENNY

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS OF

**THE MOST REVEREND ALAN HARPER,
ARCHBISHOP OF ARMAGH AND PRIMATE OF ALL IRELAND**

Members of the General Synod,

It is my privilege to welcome you to this the second ordinary session of the 46th General Synod of the Church of Ireland, the first to be held in Kilkenny and the first for 20 years not to have been held under the skilled and benign presidency of Archbishop Robin Eames. My first duty, I believe, should be to seek your support for the sending of greetings from this meeting of Synod to Lord and Lady Eames. This will be a very different synod experience in the absence of Archbishop Robin.

Members of Synod, we meet in amazing and rapidly changing times.

Last Thursday in Northern Ireland the UVF and Red Hand Commando issued a statement standing down their organization, promising to put all weaponry beyond reach (but, sadly, not beyond use,) and undertaking to oppose all criminality and cooperate fully with the police. They could, of course, have gone much further and I wish they had, but I welcome their statement as a significant step along the road to the complete removal of paramilitary violence from our society and an investment in peace building and the normalization of the political process.

That political process takes another giant leap forward today. As we meet in General Synod the newly formed Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly is also meeting to exercise for the first time its powers of government. I believe that it is important for us to send a clear message of support to those now entering executive office. Much trust has been placed in them; much is expected of them; the hopes and dreams of millions in this island for a constructive, shared future, marked by justice, equality and mutual respect, lie squarely upon their shoulders. It is important that the members of the Executive and indeed the whole body of the Assembly should be aware that we are all praying to Almighty God for success in their collaboration and that it may lead to a future freed from the evils and antagonisms of the past.

Cynics and caricaturists have conditioned us to look for the worst in those who offer themselves for public office. This is not helpful. I believe a very different message needs to be heard, namely that politics is an honourable profession, that we recognise that politicians have a difficult job to do, and that they need our encouragement and support in order to ensure that they do their work well. Clearly the electorate will hold politicians to account for their stewardship of the responsibilities they have sought and been given. The Church will feel free to criticise, cajole and encourage. Meanwhile, politicians in all parts of this island deserve our respect in acknowledgment of the demanding nature of the task they undertake on our behalf.

SYNOD AND THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Most of my remarks today will have a self consciously domestic focus.

It is right, I believe, that from time to time we should ask ourselves hard questions about what we do and the way that we do it. Since this is my first Presidential Address I propose to begin that task.

Radical and exciting change in the life of our church is beginning in some areas and called for in others. Therefore I want to provoke an internal conversation about how things are and how they might be.

You will all be aware that a Bill will be presented today which aims to link representation on the General Synod to the number of cures in each diocese. Important though this issue is, other issues to do with our model of synodical government are equally pressing.

The General Synod is the Church of Ireland's deliberative assembly. We should recognise, however, that a synod is not only an exercise in internal self-government it is also a window on the Church and indeed a shop window for the Church. Therefore we need to ask ourselves searching questions and in particular these:

- “What is the role of the General Synod in furthering the mission of the Church?”
- “How effective a vehicle is General Synod for communicating both to the internal constituency of the Church of Ireland and to the wider community the views of the Church of Ireland in seeking to be faithful to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ?”

My preliminary answers to these questions are these:

1. The General Synod does and should have an important role in furthering the mission of the Church but it isn't working as well as it should and could.
2. Whether by age or accident the synod is now failing effectively to communicate its message in ways that resonate with the needs of the 21st century.

It is of course commonplace to observe that society in general has become highly secularised and that the Church and religious affairs command little public attention unless scandal is involved. Even if I concede that those things are true (and actually I do not accept that interest in religion and things spiritual is diminishing,) even then, my conclusion is that we are called upon to shape our procedures and focus our energies in ways which will allow the important things we have to say to be clearly heard. This may, from time to time, require us to be deliberately provocative in the way we articulate the important things we have to say. So be it.

You have before you a Book of Reports. Reports like that of the Standing Committee, the Church in Society Committee, the Central Communications Board, the Youth Department, the Commission on Ministry, the Marriage Council and all the rest stand before you largely as historical accounts of past work. Take the Report of the Church in Society Committee: many of its sections are impressive and learned (for example the section on Ethical Issues and the Care of the Elderly, or the section on Advanced Directives.) No doubt these sections will receive thoughtful debate but I strongly believe that we should be requesting that our boards and committees give shape and direction to the debate which their work should provoke by putting down motions to enable this house to express an opinion or adopt a direction in response to that work. We ought, furthermore, to be mature enough as an assembly to assume that the reports themselves have been studied in advance so that opinions of a substantive nature may receive specific consideration and, potentially, endorsement by a vote of the synod.

Everyone knows that there arises with monotonous regularity the question of “Who speaks for the Church of Ireland and with what authority?” The definitive answer to that question should be that this synod speaks for the Church of Ireland, but this can only happen if issues and options are placed before synod for determination.

This matter is, however, far more than the expression of disembodied opinion. It is first about carefully and succinctly articulating an opinion; but, second, it is about considering and setting a course of action. We should, for example, give serious considerations to

what actions we might take in those areas for which we, as a Church, have direct responsibility. For example: the Ecological and Environmental sub committee of the Church in Society Committee reports a project aiming at “good ecological practice within parishes”. I should have welcomed a motion which seeks to commit this synod to requesting all parishes and dioceses to undertake an ecological and environmental audit of their activities, under the guidance of the sub committee, with the aim of establishing eco- friendly best practice in all that the Church of Ireland does. If such a motion were to be accepted then we should have embarked upon a very practical course of action which makes real what we say we believe on this issue. Sometimes, when I think of the carbon footprint created by the plethora of committees of the Church of Ireland, I wonder if we do not also need an audit at central level also.

Let me be specific by way of an example which will affect me directly: I am told that the Diocese of Armagh is to be provided with a new See House. It would be my hope that such a “new build” would incorporate every appropriate device to render the project as eco-friendly as possible. A motion from this synod requiring full account to be taken of ecological and environmental issues in any new building project would impact directly on that project and on all other future projects including, for example, the plans for a new Theological Institute. It would send a clear message about the Church of Ireland view on the responsible stewardship of creation, in addition to our equal commitment at all times to enhance the quality of the built environment.

In fine, I do not believe that it is sufficient to outline considerations and present information in the form of essentially historical accounts of past business. We need to express ourselves in specific terms and to address issues in an ordered and focussed fashion. We need to know what we think and say what we know and do what we say.

Let me mention another synodical matter. Our procedures for the passage and implementation of legislation are based on a British, Victorian, Parliamentary model. They have served us well but that does not mean that they should not be re-examined

from time to time. If, even after listening attentively and reading carefully the instructions about the Bills procedure for this synod, some members remain confused, it will come as no surprise to anyone. If, worse still, members of synod are inhibited from making a contribution to our debates for fear that they may be doing or saying the wrong thing at the wrong time we should regard that as a serious matter: our procedures should be designed to inspire confidence not fear, participation not confusion. If they don't we should change them to a more user friendly model.

So far I have addressed myself to the way we shape the current work of our Synod. Now I want to be more radical.

It has been pointed out to me that the present structures of our Church are strong in the areas of representation, safeguards, and the maintenance of ethos, but that key weaknesses include:

- A lack of clear understanding of where policy is set;
- A lack of defined short term priorities;
- A fatal separation of decision making on policy from decision making on resources;
- A lack of clarity on who makes the ultimate financial decisions and what criteria are used in making those decisions

My correspondent, who is a prominent lay person in my former diocese, wrote that, in his view:

- Structure should be shaped by vision, policy and priorities; and that
- We should be wary of being (what he called,) "committee driven"

He also said that

- Direction for the church should be set by the bishops as, what he called, "the spiritual leaders of the Church";
- That the bishops should be encouraged to communicate their vision with an indication of an order of priorities; and that

- To become a reality the vision would require to be owned, resourced, communicated effectively, reviewed regularly and given realistic time frames.
- The challenge is to shape our structures to serve our mission.

Now, very clearly it is important not to throw out babies with bathwater. Nevertheless, when a thoughtful and extremely experienced lay person expresses himself so clearly and forcefully, I believe we should listen.

Coincidentally, the responsibility for oversight of the training of clergy for ordained ministry led to the bishops adopting a “working definition” of what we see as the mission of the Church of Ireland at the beginning of the 21st century. You will have seen it in the material circulated about the new Ministry Formation Project and you will hear about it later in a presentation to be made to this synod. It remains a work in progress and already a small amendment has been proposed so that the slightly amended statement might read:

“The Church of Ireland, as an authentic part of the universal church of God, is called to develop growing communities of faith, in and through which the Kingdom of God is made known, and in which the whole people serve together as followers of Jesus Christ for the good of the world and to the glory of God the Father.”

I am confident that this statement, or some refinement of it, represents a good starting point for the exercise implied by my correspondent.

Members of Synod may know that the Standing Committee, through the Honorary Secretaries, began the work of reviewing our existing committee structures – essentially, I suspect to determine whether all the committees we have are strictly necessary or cost effective.

I want to suggest, therefore, in response to the radical critique of my anonymous correspondent, and the initiative of the Honorary Secretaries, that a somewhat different

exercise is called for. Namely, one in which perhaps the bishops and the Honorary Secretaries sit down, together or separately, to ask this kind of question:

“In the light of our mission statement for the 21st century what are the principal areas of concern in church life, what is the relative order of priority of each, and what are the best structures for dealing with these concerns, in order to respond faithfully to our calling in Christ Jesus?”

Such an exercise should be offered first for consideration by the Standing Committee and brought to General Synod for wider consultation. We should take as our point of departure a determination that the outcome of the exercise (whether differing radically from what we now have or not) will represent a deliberate and purposeful address to our common task as Christian people and that if the task is agreed the means should be willed.

Let me point, purely by way of example, to a possible outcome in one particular area. Over the past five years I have chaired the Board for Social Responsibility (NI). During that time I have been fully aware that the work we have been doing has little underpinning in the form of a coherent Theology of Social Engagement. Meanwhile, with little or no correspondence between us, the Church in Society Committee has been thinking theological thoughts on a whole range of social issues but has little practical engagement with any of them. There is no joining up of theology and action. I do not think that this makes sense. I do think that what we need is, perhaps, a Division of the Church concerned with coordinating theology and social action.

I note that, through two of its current members, the Board for Social Responsibility (RI) is telling us that the Board doesn't know what it should be doing and even if it did it couldn't do it! Look at motion no. 4 on the order paper and you will see it writ plain. Now, to my mind, a declaration of incapacity in relation to engagement in action to address issues of social concern, deprivation, exclusion or need is so serious that papering over cracks simply will not do. If we are not here to make the Kingdom of God known, present and real and to serve together for the good of the world, and if that does not mean

reaching out to serve the most vulnerable in our society, I find it hard to know why we are here. Therefore we need to examine with some urgency how we contribute, as a Church, to the well being of vulnerable humanity and how we develop a coherent theology of social engagement which leads to social action.

I say again, what I have described is chosen by way of example. I do not intend that this exercise of re-evaluation should be confined to simply the area of social concern. **My suggestion is that we take a blank sheet of paper and write on it not what, by accretion, we have inherited from a past generation but what we now need in order to fulfil the will of Christ in our day. My belief is that this is not a case of “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it”, but rather, “Let’s not fix it, let’s build what we need to do today’s job today!”**

Now if this conversation that I am attempting to provoke gains any momentum at all it will immediately run into considerations about funding, so, let us not be fearful of addressing that issue also. All synod members will be aware that a great fault line runs from top to bottom in the Church of Ireland: the fault line that separates the Treasury from the “spending departments”, that is the RCB from the General Synod.

The Act of Parliament and the Trustee functions under which the Representative Body does its work and manages its assets places upon it as the major responsibility the sustentation of the clergy. Their performance of that Trustee responsibility has been nothing less than superb. But, because of the limitations of the Trust, the RCB cannot easily allocate funds for many of the purposes which the General Synod might wish to promote.

This is, of course, the financial background against which the Priorities Fund was created. In effect, the Standing Committee and the General Synod has no money of its own except that which it administers through Priorities. It admittedly has a tiny amount in the Royalties Fund derived from the publication of materials such as the Hymnal and the Book of Common Prayer.

All this places a major inhibition on the work of the Standing Committee and all structures related to the work of the General Synod.

The Priorities Fund, quite rightly, seeks to promote new initiatives at grass roots level within the church: the variety is immense and, as seed funding, the subventions have been totally invaluable – you will find a summary of the allocations from Priorities on p233 of the Book of Reports. The Priorities Fund Committee establishes its own working criteria for allocations and operates within them. What I should like to see, either within Priorities or alongside it, is the creation of a Central Projects Fund so that the work of the Boards and Committees of this synod would have resources to draw upon when developing their work, including the power to engage professional staff where such a requirement is established. I have no wand to wave in order to achieve that outcome. **I do believe, however, that we have radically to re-examine our financing structures, both to realign them, if possible, where they are unhelpful to our core endeavour and to examine new ways to generate revenue for the core work of the Church quite independent of the obligation to provide for the sustentation of the clergy. If it cannot be done, then it cannot be done! But I am unwilling to begin from such a premise! We must become a Church which does its work efficiently but which is also properly resourced.**

I am coming towards the end of this address. There are many things I should have liked to have touched upon including issues like the debate we need in 21st century Ireland on the issues of integration and multi-culturalism; issues concerned with asylum seekers and migrant workers in our society; people trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women, children and young men; issues surrounding the current state of family life and contemporary attitudes to marriage; millennium development goals, poverty, corruption and HIV/AIDS especially affecting our partner churches in Africa. All these things and many more are issues this synod should take into consideration. However, this Address is already long enough. Therefore I want to touch on just one other issue which, to an

extent, also fits in to my essentially domestic agenda for today. I refer to issues surrounding the Review of Public Administration and Education in Northern Ireland.

EDUCATION

Early in my address I made reference to the meeting today of the Northern Ireland Executive. One of the major issues which the Assembly and the Executive will have to address has to do with the new shape of education in Northern Ireland.

The Churches, and the Church of Ireland in particular, were involved in providing education long before governments took on the responsibility. In the 1930s and 1940s the Church of Ireland, along with the two other Protestant Churches transferred their schools into the control of the state. They became “controlled schools”. They did so on the understanding that these were “church related schools” and that the transferor churches would retain a role in the governance of those schools and that their ethos would be protected.

Between 1926 and 1947 approximately 500 schools were transferred. In the same period 200 schools were provided by the state. Little by little the influence of the churches, exercised through Transferor Representatives on the Boards of Management (or Boards of Governors) has been whittled away. Under current proposals they will be further reduced. This is, at the least, a lack of understanding of the importance of transferors in the establishment of the educational system in Northern Ireland and at the worst a total lack of moral integrity in deliberately failing to honour promises entered into in good faith.

It is not for this address to examine in detail the direction which is indicated in the current consultations but I do want to say something. It is this:

The Church of Ireland has a much greater interest in education than merely the protection of ancient rights. It is important that we should be saying something quite specific about the character and values that we believe should mark the educational system as a whole

and the schools in particular. The things we say apply particularly to church related schools but are more generally applicable than that.

Our culture and way of life is born of and formed by Christianity. I believe that we should be clear that even for those who profess no Christian faith the values and standards inherited from the Christian tradition remain important. Those of other religious traditions and none have a right to have their sincerely held convictions respected. Indeed, this is something we, as a Church, should seek to ensure. However, I believe that education is much more than merely the transmission of knowledge and that education should never be morally neutral or ethically ambiguous. We are seeking to educate the whole person and we require to maintain and develop a society with strong and coherent moral and spiritual values. I believe that those moral and spiritual values are most exquisitely and perfectly expressed in and through the revelation of God in Christ and I make no apology for holding such a conviction. I therefore believe that in all schools, but especially church related schools, there should be overarching principles and emphases which we need now to advocate. These include:

1. Recognition of the place of God and the revelation of God in Christ in both the values and the observances of the institution.
2. Principles of love and respect for self and for the other which incorporate and encourage tolerance and courtesy.
3. The teaching and modelling of forgiveness with open and unambiguous commitment to reconciliation.
4. The development of attitudes of respect for and stewardship of creation.
5. Respect for the intrinsic value of the individual.
6. Respect for society and acceptance of the individual's place in it as both a human necessity and as a wider expression of personal identity and responsibility.
7. Equality of opportunity and equivalence of provision to meet the educational needs of all young people, recognising the diverse nature both of those needs and of each person's gifts.

I make no claim that this is an exhaustive or particularly well informed list. I offer it to highlight the need to engage in a debate which will carry on and be concluded without us unless we make our voice heard. Meanwhile, I would want clearly to be heard my strong objection to what I believe to be the deliberate marginalization of the rights and responsibilities of the Church of Ireland by an administration that has so attenuated the consultation process that even yet there has not been issued a key consultation document, namely Paper 20, which purports to deal with the future ownership of the schools which we originally transferred into the control but, arguably, not the ownership of the state.

IRELAND IN RAPID TRANSITION

Much earlier in this address I referred to the rapidly changing character of society in Ireland, the challenges of secularism but also the opportunities that we need to secure in order to speak into the debates being conducted in civil society. Therefore I welcome the initiative of An Taoiseach in initiating high level structured dialogue on government policy with stakeholders including the Church of Ireland. I also welcome the modest structures for similar dialogue established at Civil Service level in Northern Ireland and I should like to see them expanded. The Churches (and I speak advisedly in the plural) have an important role to play in shaping future society here in Ireland. My aim is that the Church of Ireland should be fully fitted to engage effectively in such a dialogue and that our voice should be clearly heard. I commend that aspiration to the General Synod.

Ends

Church of Ireland General Synod 2007

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