



CNI

Comment - Knocknamuckley and GAFCON - C of I RIP?

The attention of people around the world who are interested in golf was focussed on Northern Ireland this week. The Irish Open at Newcastle drew the great and the good of the sport together with their supporters. Each day was a sell out. It was the story which should have been on the front page of the Northern newspaper - The Belfast Telegraph.

The front page that should have been - about the work that Rory McIlroy had done on behalf of his Foundation for children with cancer, and the Hollywood man's pledge that if he emerged as champion he would give his total winnings to the charitable foundation - was relegated to pages two and three.

Likewise the debacle at Stormont over its failure to secure the necessary budget agreement could have filled the front page. But no, on the day it didn't get the editor's nod either.

Sadly the front page went to a dispute in a C of I parish in Dromore diocese. This was accompanied with a further report inside with a comment piece at the Telegraph's invitation from the editor of the C of I Gazette. In fairness, Canon Ellis made the best of a stickier wicket than confronted New Zealand at Lords.

What an image the C of I presented to anyone lifting that edition of the Telegraph, as I did, from the foyer of one of the north's hotels. Forget the years of confronting the accusation that sectarianism rather than political identity lay at the heart of the years of violence. Here was one parish, in one denomination which would declare itself to be a bridge church of mutual understanding, exemplifying division rather than Christian unity and fellowship within Christ.

On surface this situation was presented as differing preferences in worship. However, that is not the complete truth. The worship issue is only a symptom of a much wider and deeper malaise.

The reality is that the C of I is a divided house and that it is so is due to a corpus of clergy and laity who have claimed exclusive rights to the title “evangelical” and have abused that descriptor in a naked power drive to take over the central committees of church governance at both diocesan and central levels, including the diocesan membership of the electoral colleges which operate in the appointment of bishops. No wonder the house of bishops cannot but other than be divided. The appointment of several of the current bishops is part of the outcome of this power drive.

The great strength of the act of parliament disestablishing the C of I in 1870, namely its basic democratic system with its representative power balancing between clergy and laity, has proved to be an achilles heel.

Before anyone shouts “Foul, Ref” about this comment, they should read the March issue of the Crosslinks’ missionary society news sheet to its supporters. Crosslinks is a missionary society which claims to be anglican and evangelical. In an obituary to a cleric in Connor diocese, a colleague from Down - one of those who signed the round robin attacking the bishops of Cork and Cashel - eulogises his deceased colleague as being amongst the first to recognise the need to organise voting and take over the central bodies and committees of the church.

The only thing the rector who wrote this eulogy got wrong is that this process has been going on at the very least since the late 1950’s. I first heard it expressed then at an Easter week meeting of the “Church Society” in Lambeg Parish Hall. I have noted it since, including the occasion when the late Professor David McIlhagger of Finaghy and QUB, raised the matter at Connor Synod in St Nicholas’ Belfast Parochial Hall. He vehemently decried the issuing of an advisory canvassing list which had included his name and without his permission.

“Don’t vote for McIlhagger”, he proclaimed and sat down to applause. That was not the day or yesterday.

The current situation in respect of this process is that in some northern dioceses, clergy of a central anglican, C of I conviction and liturgical stance, feel as though they are strangers in their own land. This has been conveyed to me individually by a number of clergy whose ministry I esteem. They are reflective and spiritual practitioners of parish ministry. To state that they are disenchanted with the undermining of their church’s liturgy and theology is unavoidable.

The gentle but steady leakage of young clergy of a central churchmanship to the C of E and elsewhere should also be noted. Some were ordained in Ireland and left after a curacy here. In addition there are others who were members of C of I diocesan fellowships of vocation, who elected not to return to this church after graduating and were ordained in the C of E

where the positions some now hold bear testimony to their quality.

The sad but somewhat foreseeable situation in Knocknamuckley and the ill-judged hospitality being afforded to import further the influence of GAFCOM, the global attempt to similarly hold hostage the Anglican communion, may be attributed by some to differences in theology, differences in worship and differences on matters of sexuality.

These are all important but they are only the arenas in which the oldest sin in the world is being deployed and exhibited, namely the use and abuse of power and in the name of God.

Have no delusions. Those who unfortunately have been permitted to claim the standpoint of evangelicalism, and to take the significant control of the C of I which they hold, see absolutely nothing wrong with their exclusivism, their definition of their “elect” and the tactics they employ.

In doing so their actions and words deny the status of baptism and validity of ordination to other members of the church. They are reducing the C of I to a narrow sect where there is room only for those who conform to their rather narrow interpretations of what constitutes salvation, their view of scripture, and who is exercising a valid ordained ministry. Sadly many of these folk, as would appear to be the case in respect of the incumbent of Knocknamuckley, sit more than lightly to the forms of worship as developed, discussed, approved and financed by the General Synod of the C of I.

There are too many places in Ireland where it is only the notice board and the clergy stipend which *de facto* acknowledges the Church of Ireland - a title which affords status and security of livelihood.

The entitlement of Church of Ireland people to the form and ethos of worship which has nurtured them so far on their Christian pilgrimage has been set aside in these places without any comment or attempt by the bishop

responsible, despite the statutory affirmation by the incumbent to the diocesan when he/she was instituted. It is a process which ultimately is reducing the C of I to an affiliation of gospel halls, a virtual federation of franchise holders.

I can identify with and have sympathy with those C of I members who live in places where despite there being two or more parish churches, they cannot find one offering a form of C of I worship which upholds the authentic ethos and spiritual identity of Irish Anglicanism. Stopping the leakage of such people who are leaving because their entitlement to C of I worship as agreed by General Synod is not being met, should surely exercise the minds of those charged with securing the future witness of the C of I.

Surrounded by a host of schemes promoted by bishops allegedly to renew the parishes of their diocese, can I dare to state that the first stage of church growth is to stop the current outflow of committed but offended and injured parishioners.

Houston McKelvey

