



A series reflecting on the Church of Ireland General Synod 2014



The Most Revd Dr Richard Clarke, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, giving his presidential address

Synod reflection 1 - The Church in the public place

A motif of the church in the public place arose in diverse aspects of the C of I General Synod in Dublin last week. Thank heavens, because there has been limited evidence over recent years of the church effectively engaging with and holding to account the civic powers in those areas of community life which shape the lives of our fellow citizens and our church membership.

There were three major voices in the articulation of the church in the public place.

(i) The most major was heard clearly in that event and place which communicates the essence of the Church of Ireland - namely the Eucharist for General Synod in the national cathedral dedicated to St Patrick.

The manner of celebration and the music were exemplary. The sermon by the Bishop of Cashel was perhaps the best this observer of almost forty of these services has heard. Unfortunately the text of it has not yet been made available to the press or public. So what follows is what I think I heard!

Bishop Burrows recalled the recent survey of church attendance in C of E dioceses. Most dioceses which had engaged in various initiatives and programmes did not show growth. One diocese which showed growth had not employed any schemes. That was Canterbury under Archbishop Rowan Williams who had stressed the need for church members to take the church into the public place and to talk about faith and its relevance to the issues affecting people.

The bishop drew on the narrative of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. That social encounter at an everyday meeting place changed the dynamic of the woman's life and she in turn witnessed to her community.

The bishop encouraged the membership of the church to share the riches it has received through the grace of God with others. Talk the gospel in the public place - coffee bars, work places and so on.

(ii) If a concrete example is sought of how the church could address the civic powers on matters affecting the community, the speech by the Bishop of Derry in proposing the Board of Education (NI) most aptly will fulfil that quest.

The speech addresses an inequality in educational provision. The accompanying proposal was framed following extensive and ongoing consultation with the education boards of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches whose annual meetings will also receive a similar proposal on the issue.





The content, which covers a specialist area, was well marshalled for direct communication at a rostrum. It was totally accurate. It left those who listened with no doubt about the purpose and intent of the desired outcome of the proposal. (1)

This was the C of I speaking with one voice island wide concerning the lives of the children of the Protestant community in a part of this land. Perhaps the Minister to whom this proposal is directed, and any political party which seeks to establish an all Ireland state, might wish to consider that this vote was taken by an effective and long established all-Ireland representative church

forum which has sought and contributed to education in every county in partnership with governments for over two centuries.

This church has been in the public place in respect of education and its' witness through teachers, clergy and governors is as necessary as never before.

(iii) A presidential address - on the state of the church and society - perforce has to cover several unavoidable areas such as tributes to services rendered and the remembrance of those members ascended from the church militant to the church triumphant. There are many facets in this year's address by Archbishop Richard Clarke which will repay further consideration and prayer. (2)

The Archbishop looking to the future re-cast and re-presented a list of areas the church needed to address. Most of that agenda will not be implemented by policies and initiatives which seek to avoid the church being in the public place.

Time will tell. Time will judge us. Have we a word from The Lord? The Old Testament prophets and especially those of the eight century before Christ engaged with the civic and often barbarian powers of their time. Christ embraced and exemplified their tradition and witness. He revitalised it at Calvary. He called his followers to speak for the voiceless and to have a priority for the poor.

Bishops, and synod through Standing Committee may need to advise the agencies or boards by which this church monitors and engages with civic society of a number of specific areas raised last week. This is essential for the church to be clearly observed in the public place, to hear it speak credibly on behalf of the Lord it seeks to represent, and most importantly, for this agency of the Servant Lord to act effectively.

Houston McKelvey

(1)

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/protestant-churches-unite-in-call-for-new-body-to-support-controlled-schools-30254777.html>

(2)

<http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/regional/politicians-cannot-simply-offer-our-children-more-poverty-1-6048753>