



Synod reflection 2



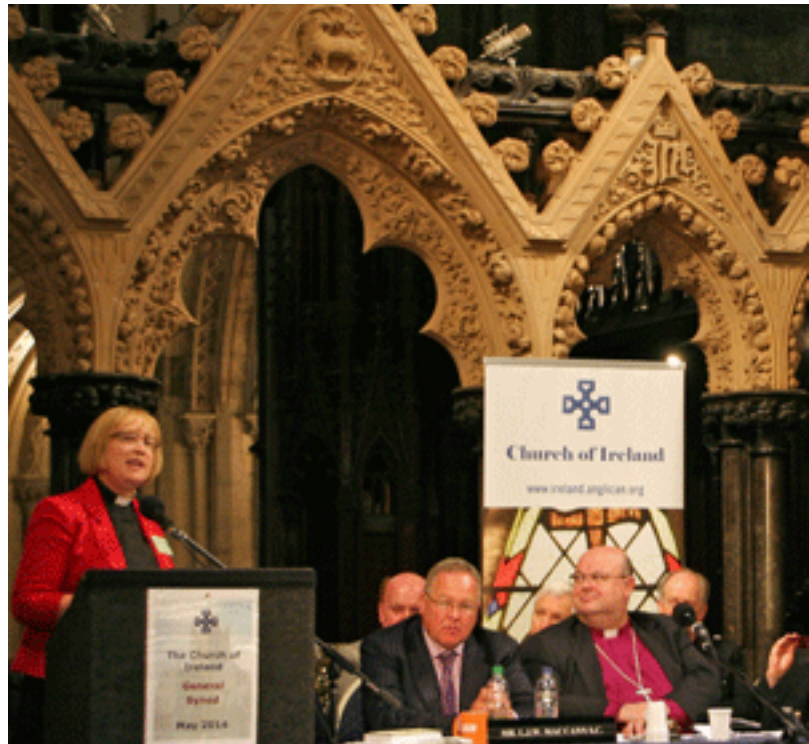
Synod reflection 2 - A moment of Grace

General Synods can from time to time be dominated by a single issue or raft of issues. The ordination of women to the priesthood was a single issue which understandably covered a significant time span. However, primarily it was a single issue focus, whereas liturgical renewal seemed to go on for ever before the Book of Common Prayer was revised almost at times line by line into its current form and published “with the authority” of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland.

The ordination of women was a watershed issue. Life afterwards for the church and its membership - clergy and laity - could never be the same again. It had ramifications for church unity. It had theological dimensions for a small, but valuable and well-esteemed, number of clergy who could not

support the move. There was pain for these men. Some were of an evangelical stance in their understanding of scripture and some were 'catholic' in their understanding of priesthood.

There was pain in the General Synod as friends and fellow members of Christ's body begged to differ with each other. My mind is still tender with images of that period. Like that of a sister-in-Christ, now departed, and her pain and suffering when one year this



The President of the Methodist Church

development which most of us had expected to progress, was virtually halted in its progress. Like another friend, an Honorary Clerical Secretary of Synod, who, without fuss, gently resigned on a matter of principle related to the management of the process.

I was deeply moved by the manner in which the General Synod progressed the mutual acceptance of ministry between the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland. It was grace filled. The spirit was ably and sensitively encapsulated in the addresses made by the President of the Methodist Church and by the Archbishop of Armagh. The latter did not ignore in his pleasure the fact that there were some in the C of I including clergy who had misgivings about this development. His concern for these folk was palpable.

The standing ovation by General Synod for the vote and the step change in inter-church relationships caught the grace-filled spirit of the occasion. It is seldom that spirituality tangibly overwhelms the business procedures of synod! That is not a bad thing, because it enabled the underscoring and ownership of such a unique development in a very distinct manner indeed. This was the right sort of "happy clapping".

Hopefully those who worked on behalf of the two churches to bring this agreement to its current stage will feel affirmed by the Synod and in a few

weeks by Conference.(1) The forwarding of the process does represent a commitment to extra work on behalf of each conscientious member involved in representing our churches. It required travel and separation at times from family. It required study, prayer and self-questioning. It required a discipline in dialogue both listening acutely and speaking in truth and in charity.

Such a momentous decision has not happened in a vacuum. Many like myself are indebted and grateful to the Methodist Church for a variety of influences and support. Role models like former Methodist President, Eric Gallagher who in faith and at some risk travelled with Bishop Arthur Butler, Rev Jack Weir and Canon Bill Arlow to meet the IRA leadership at Feakle to plead for peace. Exemplary youth workers like Rev Dr Johnston McMaster and Eric Rainey of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award with whom we shared in the work of the Churches' Youth Service Council in dark days in Northern Ireland. The parochial and pastoral experience of the support and company of neighbouring Methodist clergy and congregants which has enriched the lives of many C of I clergy and their parishioners and especially so in dark times when violence threatened to dismember the community. The social conscience and witness of the Methodist Church which is still being demonstrated in the Belfast Missions, the Copelands Centre and other areas in Ireland is inspirational and enriching. Evidence of a church which punches well above its weight of numbers.

In particular I would testify to the impact from over twenty years in inter-church endeavour in education in Northern Ireland to the indebtedness of the Church of Ireland to those who represented the Methodist Church. People of utmost professionalism like the late John Frost, former principal of Sullivan Upper School and the then chair of the Methodist Board of Education, and of its secretary, Rev Dr William McAllister who was Vice Principal of the Methodist College, Belfast. Their mark was still evident in Synod this year in Bishop Ken Good's appeal for equality of treatment of the Transferor Representatives' Council by the northern minister. John and Billy were key members of the midwifery team which enabled the TRC's establishment and likewise they were to the fore in the dialogue and effort which produced the inter-church core programme on Religious Education for Northern Ireland.

Too often we talk about Christian fellowship and ignore in the process that it is not basically about worship and tea and buns. Fundamentally Christian fellowship is a by-product of shared endeavour in the proclamation and witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That the Covenant Council has been able to tap the existing wells of experience between our two churches augurs well for the hopefully more-intimate shared future in faith. The fact that

sacramentally our identity is from the same source should shape and inform our further growth in grace, fellowship and the work of Christ our Lord.

May the members of the General Synod who in the future find themselves having to address seemingly divisive issues, cling to the precious memory of this grace filled process and experience which dealt with differences and difficulties deemed to be insurmountable by sincere and committed Anglicans of earlier generations.

Houston McKelvey

(1) Explanatory memorandum of Bill

<http://ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/Synod/2014/Bills/Bill1.pdf>