

From Northern Ireland

A Report by Harry Uprichard

The Church of Ireland: The episcopalian branch of the Protestant population affiliated to the Anglican communion, meets annually in what is known as General Synod – usually in Dublin though occasionally in Belfast. In 1986, as in all the major denominational groups, the Anglo Irish Agreement came in for lively discussion. The recently appointed primate Dr Robin Eames had earlier spoken quite strongly and critically of the Agreement describing it among other things as being 'flawed'. At General Synod expression of opinion was quite animated with forceful statements both for and against the Agreement. As in the other Protestant denominations one major criticism was the way in which the Agreement had been introduced without consultation with Northern Ireland's political representatives.

Another important matter involving General Synod's attention was the issue of divorce, particularly in the light of the current referendum on the subject in the Irish Republic. Anglicanism has traditionally taken a strong line against divorce. This was evident in debate though the consensus was to allow public opinion to express itself freely on the issue as to whether this should be a matter of state legislation or not. In ecumenism the discussions with Roman Catholicism featured prominently, the main focus of attention being on the ARCIC consultation. The closure of some churches of the Church of Ireland in the South because of fewness of members was a growing cause for concern. The trend was seen to be inevitable and the Church was doing its best by means of reorganisation to cope with the situation.

The Methodist Conference: Home Mission discussed and proposed some methods of combating urban ghetto situations as well as problems in rural communities. Dr Norman Taggart's book on the social aspect of the Church's mission was seen as particularly helpful.

South Africa came in for discussion with a strong opposition lobby to apartheid and an equally strong clamour for the implementation of sanctions. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was not seen as the answer to the Northern Ireland situation but as at least some help in the way ahead. Continuing conversations, the promotion of better relations and all party talks were urged. Again, there were some strong criticisms of the Agreement among which those of the outgoing president, Dr Hamilton Skillen, figured prominently.

The divorce referendum issue was also a subject under discussion. But one of the most important matters dealt with by Conference was their assessment of Freemasonry. The general opinion was that its spirit of secrecy among other things could harm the Christian's loyalty to Christ.

The Roman Catholic Bishops: These meet at Maynooth, but do not permit media coverage of their proceedings, so that information comes from opinion and statements made outside the actual gathering. Lay participation in the liturgy was said to be on the increase.

In this brief report, Harry Uprichard reviews the 1986 annual meetings of several denominations in Northern Ireland.



Questioned about erosion in attendance at worship and confession the reply admitted this to a degree but on no alarming scale. With regard to the divorce referendum it was seen as the church's duty to give instruction but in no way to interfere with the expression of public opinion.

The Bishops' Conference was concerned about the increase in pornography particularly in video and magazines. It was the duty of parents to ensure the moral structures in which their children were to be reared and of the state to ensure that nothing harmful to this was allowed. Media accountability on this score was an important consideration. From a practical point of view the bishops were pleased to note that great use their Church was making of the ACE scheme as a measure of combating the prevalent unemployment. Opinion as to the Anglo Irish Agreement was, as might be expected, cautiously welcoming, recognising at the same time both the unhappiness of the Protestant community with the measure and the difficulties of implementing it. Mixed marriages as ever were a topic of discussion.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland: This met at Church House in Belfast in the first week of June. Practical matters figured prominently. The future of Church House itself was among these. The building, quite an imposing one in the city centre, is unfortunately in need of extensive and costly repair if it is to continue in use. The matter provided a rather emotional debate, some stating that, however costly, the church could and should rise to the occasion, that Presbyterianism in Ireland would not be the same without 'Church House' in Fisherwick Place. Others maintained that we must be realistic and consider a move to more suburban premises housing not only Church offices but the theological college as well. The matter was referred to the Church for further thought. A new method of financing the ministry was another practical matter discussed involving a greater degree of centralisation and taking into consideration the number of years of ministerial service.

The issue of Inter-church relations, usually a flash-point of debate, was relatively quiet. Some questions were put as to the official position of the Irish School of Ecumenics within the Church's structure. Fears were also expressed at one resolution which pointed dangerously in the direction of joint worship with Roman Catholics.

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The Board of Evangelism expressed concern that insufficient time was being given to corporate prayer and urged congregations to give priority to this matter. A heated discussion took place on the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The outgoing Moderator Dr Robert Dickinson and the Government Committee in their statements had been strongly critical of the Agreement. This was reflected in the debate. The incoming Moderator Dr John Thompson urged upon the Church the necessity of keeping alive a vision of the work before us and this note was echoed in many of the speeches at the Assembly.

Other Church groupings: Other churches who met in Conference included the Baptist, Reformed Presbyterian and Evangelical Presbyterian Churches but in a short report like this it is difficult to cover all denominations. However, what we have considered gives some idea of the current thinking within Church conferences at their annual meetings. It reflects clearly the serious issues about which Churches are rightly concerned.

As always, nevertheless, it would be preferable to see as much time given to purely spiritual matters as it is given to political and social concerns. If such were the case it would be of even greater benefit to the Christian cause throughout the world.