

SPECIAL AGENDA IV

DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTIONS

VOICE OF THE CHURCH IN PUBLIC LIFE

A background paper from the Mission and Public Affairs Council

"That this Synod, mindful of the questions raised in public debate about the role of the Church in civic society, invites the Divisions of the Archbishops' Council to report to the General Synod, before the end of the quinquennium, on their work:

- *to foster clearer understanding of the Christian faith among the institutions and organisations of society;*
and
- *to reinforce the claims of the Church to take its place in public life in Britain."*

Introduction

1. This motion addresses one of the most important questions facing the churches today. The role of the Church of England in public affairs is manifested at every level of community life and is emphatically not confined to the work of the Divisions of the Archbishops' Council. A comprehensive picture would encompass a great volume of work going on in dioceses, deaneries and parishes, as well as the work of the other National Church Institutions. The Church of England is also involved in many relevant ecumenical ventures which cannot be listed in a short paper.
2. Within the Divisions of the Archbishops' Council, the increasingly missiological focus of the Council's activities means that an expanding body of work addresses the public sphere. Much work is handled collaboratively across the NCIs, and so the profile of the Church's engagement with public life is not easy to capture. We offer some examples of this work in this paper, but do not pretend that they are all embracing.
3. Ultimately, the motion's reference to "the role of the Church in civic society" embraces the vocation of the whole church – to be a missionary presence in the public and community life of the whole nation.

The Church in Public Life

4. Whilst public life, of course, extends far beyond the tight circles of Westminster and Whitehall, these national structures are of great importance. The Church of England, as the church by law established, has the great privilege of access to Parliament (especially through the Lords Spiritual) and to the structures of public policy-making. This access creates opportunities for both public and personal contributions and interventions. Because of this access, the Church of England is not simply one pressure group among many. It is therefore often necessary to judge when our interventions should be made in public, and when our objectives are better served by building on our relationships with key people and offices. It is thus not possible to assess the volume of the Church's contribution by reports in the media of what has been placed on the public record.
5. It is particularly important to remember the Church of England's everyday presence within particular regions, cities, towns and communities. The most effective way to

communicate the role of the Christian faith in public life is through the witness and service of Christian men and women in their daily lives. The Archbishops' Council contributes many resources to such local work, but it is in the dioceses and parishes that the picture fills out and the impact becomes clear.

6. Members of Synod might also wish to consider how the thinking and expertise embodied in reports to, and debates within, Synod can be used more widely as tools for public engagement in the dioceses and parishes.

Government Perceptions – and Misperceptions – of the Church

7. The paper from the Diocese of Chester refers to the report commissioned by the Bishop for Urban Life and Faith from the Von Hügel Institute (*Moral, but No Compass*). It would be premature to comment in depth on this independent research which has still to be studied and debated within the Church of England. It deserves to be considered carefully and in its entirety rather than relying on selective quotations in the media.
8. The Institute's report found that many church respondents mentioned instances of deep levels of illiteracy about faith among politicians and officers, both at local and national level. There is undoubtedly some truth in this point. Nevertheless, the picture is far from monochrome. Particular individuals, and particular departments, are better attuned than others to the realities of religion in Britain today. For example, in the realm of education, the Church of England's role in public life is considerable, recognized and, to a very great extent, welcomed by government, as the development of academies under the auspices of the Church demonstrates. We must therefore beware of alienating our more helpful contacts by overplaying a general point about government and public servants.
9. The Church of England does encounter ignorance about religion, and Christianity in particular. Outright militant secularism does not characterise the majority of our encounters, although generalised secular assumptions are commonplace as a kind of default position; perhaps reflecting the extent to which a whole generation has little foundational knowledge of church life.
10. More frequently, church bodies like MPA find, amongst those they are dealing with in the public sphere, a mentality which lumps together all faiths as, basically, the same kind of phenomenon. It is assumed that faith is manifested primarily in strange rules for believers and that the debate about faith in public life is about how much odd behaviour by the faithful can be tolerated without jeopardising social cohesion. Expressions like "faith communities" and "faith-based initiatives" can reinforce these views at the expense of an accurate understanding of particular religions.
11. The ways in which the government collects data on religious groups and faith positions can lead to category mistakes when information gathered for one purpose is applied in other contexts. Because the government has, with justification, been especially concerned about religious extremism and social exclusion, it has sometimes focussed on particular (often minority) religious groups in ways which illuminate those issues but distort the overall picture.
12. There have been many examples of government departments imagining that they have consulted "the churches", or even "The Church of England" when, in fact, they have

only been in touch with unrepresentative parts of the whole and have ignored the churches' own structures.

13. In dealings with government at the higher levels, and in some departments, the special place of the Church of England in the life of the nation is often recognised and regarded as part of the political landscape. Doors still open for us. This does not of itself, however, make it easier for us to win particular arguments. Our influence on policy is based on a number of factors, including the cogency of our case and the weight of expertise rooted in the parishes and communities of the land.
14. On a positive note, the report from the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, *Our Shared Future*, published in 2007, recommended that the Government and Local Authorities should work with faith communities to develop programmes to improve "religious literacy" on the part of public agencies. This is being taken up by the Dept. for Communities and Local Government, and the Church of England, through MPA, is maintaining contact with the unit charged with initiating this programme.
15. The Church of England, therefore, is in a unique, potential-filled, but changing position in relation to the structures of public life. We have to work both with the opportunities which our established status still affords, and with the cruder calculus of political opinion-forming and lobbying. It is a position requiring subtlety, particularly when assessing appropriate tactics if we consider our views are not receiving the response they deserve. Our ability to exercise effective influence could easily be put at risk if we were perceived to be taking only the road of strident adversarialism or be seen to lobby solely in our interests as an institution.

Some Theological Reflections on the Church and Public Life

16. The paper supporting the Chester motion explains how the motion originated in the debate about the BA employee who challenged the company ruling that she should not wear a cross on her uniform. This is an interesting case on which to hang some observations which may be of wider relevance.
17. The case was a good example of Christians arguing that they should be treated on a par with members of other faiths. The fundamental point here is that people should be free to practise their faith in the public realm (subject to the requirements of good public order) and, in this, religious freedom is indivisible – what goes for one faith should apply to all.
18. However, this approach can reinforce the idea that all faiths behave alike. Whereas some faiths do have strict dress-codes which are essential to proper observance, Christians are bound by no such code. Indeed, Jesus said, "Beware of practising your piety before others to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matt 6:1).
19. Some Christians might defend the wearing of crosses or crucifixes in terms of human rights. We need to be careful when adopting this line of argument. It is undoubtedly the case that much of the secular debate is couched in human rights terms, particularly since the passage of the Human Rights Act. Nevertheless, the concept of human rights is not a straightforward one to integrate fully into Christian theology. This is not the place to go into the complex arguments about theology and rights. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in a lecture at the London School of Economics in May 2008, made an important

contribution to this debate which offers a theological approach to the dialogue about rights. (<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1780?q=human+rights>)

But the language of human rights, interpreted as the basis for the State's relationship to faith, is not one with which all Christians can be comfortable.

20. So the feeling that Christians are misunderstood, and even discriminated against, in Britain today needs approaching with care. There are certainly instances which point in that direction. Misunderstanding does not always, however, equate with discriminatory practice. Care is needed to ensure that cases are approached on the basis of evidence, and not merely stories gleaned from the media which frequently has its own axe to grind. In addition, the church must be very clear of its theological ground since it is all too easy to adopt the tools of secular liberalism (which none of us who live amid today's culture can avoid internalising to some extent) as if they straightforwardly reinforce our case against secularism's deficiencies.
21. The key point here is that Christians are called to be "resident aliens", never fully at ease within the structures of the world. We acknowledge a higher authority than the state, secular society or public opinion: Almighty God, to whom all human authorities (and we ourselves) are accountable. It is helpful sometimes to remember that for all the casual talk of being a 'secular democracy' we are in fact a 'liberal democracy' whose governance remains formally underpinned by an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. We are governed by the Queen in Parliament under God. It is part of the calling of the Established Church never to be "domesticated" by the administration of the day.
22. There will therefore be occasions when the Church needs to speak with a prophetic voice, challenging the public authorities and even public opinion. *Faith in the City*, Archbishop Runcie's sermon after the Falklands War, the *MakePovertyHistory* campaign, the recent General Synod resolution on detention without trial are all examples of this prophetic ministry. There are many others.
23. Christians may, in good faith, differ in their analysis of some of the ills besetting society – many of us want our church to be counter-cultural, for the gospel is a profound challenge to all cultures, but we do not always find it easy to agree which bits of culture are of God and which are demonic. These disagreements can mean that the secular world's desire for simple positions and a "party line" are not always to be had from the Church of England. In a media environment that likes everything to be cut and dried, our interventions in public debate are sometimes felt to be less telling as a result. The Church of England's role in public life will, therefore, always require dialogue – dialogue within the church, and between the church and the institutions of culture and the state.

Examples of Engagement with Public Life

24. As noted earlier, it would be a heavy task indeed to give a comprehensive account of all that is being done to meet the concerns of this motion. Below are a few current examples.
25. *NCIs Parliamentary Unit*. In April 2008, the Archbishops' Council, the Church Commissioners and Lambeth Palace agreed to work together to create a Parliamentary Unit for the NCIs. The objective is to enhance the Church of England's ability to

influence public policy in Westminster and Whitehall and to build relationships with MPs, members of the Lords and key civil servants. The aim is to complement the existing work on policy, which has been a strength of MPA, Education, Legal and other Divisions, by following the policy issues through the legislative process, enabling Christian thinking to have more impact on the shape of national policies.

26. The Unit also brings together a number of existing activities within the NCIs; including the support for the Lords Spiritual (currently managed from Lambeth Palace) and will work closely with the 2nd Estates Commissioner in his role in the Commons. It will continue and develop the joint MPA/Communications Parliamentary Briefings on key topics.
27. The Unit began work in September 2008 and is located within the Mission and Public Affairs Division whilst serving all the NCIs. This is a good example of work which transcends the Divisional structures of the Archbishops' Council.
28. ***Church of England Representative to the EU Institutions.*** Also in April 2008, The Rev Canon Gary Wilton took up his post as the Church of England's Representative to the EU Institutions, based in Brussels. This new post is funded by a consortium including the church of Holy Trinity Brussels, Lambeth Palace, the Bishop of London and Christian Aid and is supported by the House of Bishops' Europe Panel. MPA is contributing significant staff time to setting up and managing the post. Close relationships have been established with the Conference of European Churches and other church representatives to the EU.
29. As with the Parliamentary Unit, the Representative to the EU Institutions will work to keep the dialogue going between the Church of England and the people and processes which do so much to shape public life in Britain.
30. ***Equality Act.*** In extending equality legislation to include the prohibition of discrimination in the provision of goods and services on grounds of religion and belief, the Government has moved into contentious waters. Throughout the legislative process, and the creation of a body to implement the law, the Church of England has been deeply involved, (through the staff of the NCIs and the bishops in the Lords) in making submissions to Government and holding consultations both in its own right and as part of conversations and coalitions with other churches, faiths and groups. The same has been true in relation to the passage and implementation of the ***Charities Act.***
31. This work has drawn upon the expertise of the Legal Office, the networks of the MPA and Lambeth Palace interfaith adviser, and has involved staff in a variety of bodies including the Religion and Belief Consultative Group. Discussions have not always been easy, but the group is assisting the new Government Equality Office to understand better the positions and differences embraced by the concepts of religion and belief.
32. With the Equality Commission and the Government Equality Office in place, the Church of England is building strong links at Commissioner and officer level to ensure that the prevention of religious discrimination involves a properly sensitive understanding of the Christian faith.
33. ***A Few Further Examples.*** Beyond the three examples above, any assessment of the Church of England's engagement with civil society through the Divisions of the Archbishops' Council would have to look at the work of the Communications Office as

it strives to build mission opportunities into the relationship to the media; the Church Buildings Campaign which involves Cathedrals and Church Buildings, MPA, Communications and diocesan staff; innumerable briefings for interventions in the Upper House by the Lords Spiritual; the new All Party Parliamentary Group on Hospital Chaplaincy; the follow-up with government in the wake of Synod debates on policy matters and the extensive work of the Education Division and the National Society which, in many ways, stands out as a prime example of the Church of England's commitment to Christian values in civil society and the future of the nation. Even these examples only scratch the surface of current activity.

Conclusions and Caveats

34. It is important that, in reaffirming the place of the Church of England in civil society, we state clearly the basis on which we 'claim ... to take (a) place in public life in Britain'. Our claim rests, first, on the service we offer to the nation and its communities and, second, flowing from that service, our experience and expertise. That combination of service, experience and expertise is what earns us the right to have our voice heard and our experience taken seriously. It will also enable us to ensure that the crucial role of the Christian faith in shaping the institutions and values of this nation is not forgotten. We need to state this clearly for our own benefit but also to ensure that we are not interpreted by others to be claiming particular privileges over and above those we already enjoy as the Established Church in England.
35. The Divisions of the Archbishops' Council are scrutinised regularly by the Council and report to the Synod through the Council each year. Two questions therefore arise. Would an extra tier of reporting add value? Would it be a productive use of the limited resources within the Divisions? The Finance Department, in discussion with other officers, has estimated that the opportunity cost of preparing reports for Synod in the terms framed by the motion would be in the range of £10—£15,000.
36. We do, however, strongly agree with the Chester Diocese that it is an important and worthwhile objective to focus on the Church's capacity to engage with public life and contribute to public awareness of the role of the Church in civil society. We invite General Synod to agree that a better way of achieving that objective would be for our existing scrutiny and reporting procedures to highlight this theme in future reports to Synod on the work of the MPA Council.

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