

## ***The Way ahead: Church of England Schools in the new millennium***

### **Introduction**

1. *The Way ahead* was published on 14 June 2001. Its provenance is in the General Synod debate on *Church of England Schools in the New Millennium* (GS 1321) held at the November Group of Sessions in 1998. At that time, Synod passed a resolution recognising *nem. con.* that “Church schools stand at the centre of the Church’s mission to the nation”. The resolution addressed parishes, dioceses and the Archbishops’ Council.
2. Subsequently, the Archbishops’ Council established the Church Schools Review Group under the Chairmanship of Lord Dearing to “review the achievements of Church of England schools and to make proposals for their future development”. Although the Review was originally to have taken three years, this was shortened by the Chairman to eighteen months with a view to publishing a report in the summer of 2001 (that is, shortly after the General Election).
3. *The Way ahead* is the first major national report on Church of England Schools since *A Future in Partnership* published in 1984. *The Way ahead* seeks to present for the first time a coherent national policy towards Church of England schools, bringing together the three strands of distinctiveness, provision and vocation as outlined in the 1998 Synod debate and stated in the Review Group’s own terms of reference. In doing so, *The Way ahead* decisively moves the Church on from the earlier Durham Report into Religious Education (*The Fourth R*) published in 1970 which suggested in the particular context of its time a greater emphasis on the Church’s “general” function in education.

### **Methodology**

4. During the course of its work, the Review Group obtained substantive evidence, both written and oral, from a wide range of sources. Visits were undertaken to many Church schools and to several of the Church Colleges of Higher Education. Meetings were held with ecumenical

partners and with officials from the Department for Education and Employment (now Skills). A range of bodies was consulted.

5. The Review Group issued an Interim Progress Report to the Archbishops' Council in July 2000 and a Consultation Report in December 2000. The aim of the latter was to expose the Review Group's thinking to the Church and to relevant agencies so that the final report could reflect as wide a consensus as possible. Some 800 pages of comment were received in response to the Consultation Report; and as a result the Review Group modified a number of its provisional recommendations.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

6. *The Way ahead* sets out the full implications of the Synod's resolution that "Church schools stand at the centre of the Church's mission to the nation":-
  - Church schools must be distinctively Christian institutions and fully integrated into the life of parishes. The report argues for a growing unity of purpose within the whole Church community working in a new partnership with Church schools.
  - The report recommends developing the provision of Church schools, proposing increased provision equivalent to 100 additional Church of England secondary schools over the next 7-8 years, and enhanced primary provision in areas where it is sparse. It recommends that any new Church schools must be both distinctively Christian and inclusive communities, nurturing children from Christian backgrounds in their faith whilst seeking to bring children from different backgrounds together as a distinctive expression of Christ's commandment to love one another and of Christian service. It gives an explicit welcome to ecumenical initiatives.
  - *Most importantly of all*, the report challenges the Church at every level to encourage the vocation to teach, and to support Christian teachers and leaders in all schools. The report makes clear that the supply of Christian teachers is the single most important issue facing Church schools now and in the future. It urges the whole Church to be proactive in caring for Christian teachers. The report sees a substantially enhanced role for the Church Colleges of Higher Education in achieving these aims.

## Developments since the publication of *The Way ahead*

7. The Government's White Paper on Education, *Schools Achieving Success*, was published on 5 September 2001. This welcomes an increase in the number of schools with a religious character as part of the Government's agenda for increasing diversity and raising standards, and proposes a decrease in the Church's capital contribution to a Voluntary Aided school from 15 per cent to 10 per cent. The White Paper states (paragraph 5.31):

"We note that Lord Dearing's report to the Archbishops' Council recommends that the Church of England increase significantly the number of secondary places it supports. Where there is local support, we will welcome that. We want these schools to be inclusive, and welcome the recommendation that Church of England schools should serve the whole community, not confining admissions to Anglicans. We want faith schools that come into the maintained sector to add to the inclusiveness and diversity of the schools system and to be ready to work with non-denominational schools and those of other faiths."

8. The disturbances in some of the northern towns over the summer and the atrocities in America on 11 September 2001 and their aftermath have generated widespread debate on the Government's proposals. Secularist organisations and some sections of the press have attacked Church schools as being potentially "divisive" and creating segregation in society along racial lines.
9. But the majority of the Church of England's schools are primary schools serving their local communities, and many have significant numbers of children of other faiths in them. The disparity in provision between our 4,500 primary and 200 secondary schools means that only one in five children in our primary schools can currently continue their education in a Church of England secondary school. Faced with such overwhelming demand from Christian parents it has not been surprising that some of our secondary schools have allocated most of their places to children from Christian families. *The Way ahead* now challenges all Church schools to consider how they are responding to the changing needs of the local community, and to reserve some places for children of other faiths and no faith. Developing more Church secondary schools will in itself help to ease the pressure on places and create greater inclusiveness.

## Conclusion

10. This is one of the most positive and challenging times for the Church of England in relation to schools in living memory. The Government's White Paper potentially gives us new opportunities for developing our provision. *The Way ahead* gives us a renewed sense of purpose in our schools and an overall policy to take us forward into this new millennium. At the same time, there is much to be done. Developing and strengthening our existing 4,700 Church of England schools, and nurturing the links between the whole Church community and the Church schools and Colleges, will be a significant challenge for the whole Church, but it is one which can give the whole Church a renewed confidence in her mission to the nation.

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