



CHURCH of IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD
CHURCH in SOCIETY COMMITTEE
European Affairs Working Group

TAKING OUR PLACE IN EUROPE: NORTHERN IRELAND'S EUROPEAN STRATEGY

We welcome this consultation paper from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and are grateful for the opportunity to respond to this important document.

We entirely concur with the statement (p.2) that 'The importance of the European Union (EU) to Northern Ireland cannot be over-emphasised.' We are, however, aware that the EU's significance for Northern Ireland, and the extent to which it has contributed to the development of the region, is not as widely appreciated as might be the case. There is, in our opinion, much to be done by government to redress this state of affairs, and to bring home to members of the public that membership of the European Union brings great benefits to all, both economic and social.

In particular we would endorse the view (p. 3) that Northern Ireland must not be passive within the EU. The region has much to give as well as to gain, and is especially well-placed to achieve its objectives by the fact that, not only can it rely the support of its own government in EU matters, but also can frequently call upon the good offices of its neighbour, Ireland, with which it shares many interest, especially in the spheres of agriculture and tourism. As the document sets out (p. 12) 'Northern Ireland has well-established North-South links with Ireland, set out in the North-South provisions of the Belfast Agreement.' Policies to maximise the potential benefits of these links need to be pursued actively. We would urge, moreover, that much may be gained by fostering contacts with other European regions. Those with Scotland and Wales are obviously important, but deepened relations with continental regions would also repay attention.

It is regrettable if the benefits of EU membership are seen purely in economic terms, vitally important though these may be, and as a Church we would stress the importance of those ethical and democratic principles that lie at the heart of the EU and are guaranteed by the incorporation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in the Constitutional Treaty.

'Taking our place in Europe' makes reference in several places to 'civic' society, which we take to be synonymous with the term 'civil' society, a concept that is much discussed by European churches who see themselves as part of that society. The role of the churches in maintaining the values on which the EU is based, 'respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights' (art.1.2 of the constitutional treaty) should be an influential one, and is indeed for the first time guaranteed by clause 51 in the constitutional treaty which provides for formal consultation. The values mentioned above are central to much political debate in Northern Ireland, and the Northern Ireland experience has much to contribute to that debate on a wider stage.