

Proposer's Speech for the Commission for Christian Unity and Dialogue.

General Synod 2024

**Rt Rev Andrew Forster
Bishop of Derry & Raphoe**

Archbishop,

In proposing that the report of the Commission for Christian Unity and Dialogue is taken into consideration I want to bring us back, as it were, to first principles; Why do we have such a commission?

The reasons are set out on Page 244 of your Book of Reports, the first bullet point being:

'To promote within the Church of Ireland the vision of Christian Unity.'

The vision for Christian unity is born out of the very words of Christ in His prayer in John Chp 17; *'that they may be one.'* Jesus links that unity with mission; we see that in the beauty of the words of verse 23 *'may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'*

Christian unity is, of course a laudable goal in itself, but we forget too readily the link between unity with mission. Unity and mission are clearly linked by Jesus, in a synod were we speak a lot about mission we do well to remind ourselves of the core importance of unity to the success of our mission.

For many of us the ecumenical journey has been a deeply personal one. In the kindness of God we've found that, as we dismantle the metaphorical barbed wire fences that for too long were built around our denominational allegiance, that our identities are nurtured and given extra colour by a depth of fellowship that comes to treasure unity and celebrates diversity.

Our ecumenical journey is all about continuing to take steps along a joyful pathway that moves us from being acquaintance, to being a friend to being family, in all the richness of familial diversity. It's a journey that is always worthwhile.

That richness has been well and truly celebrated this year with the marking of the centenary of the Irish Council of Churches. It is worth reminding ourselves that the six original members, the Church of Ireland, The Methodist Church, The Moravian Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church and the Religious Society of Friends came together in the aftermath and indeed in the midst of turmoil. The Home Rule Crisis, partition and civil war. They came together because they believed they had a better story than one of division, hurt and pain. We still have a better story than division, hurt and pain.

A special centenary service was held in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast with not just one sermon but two! The first was preached by that great ecumenical warrior, Rev Dr Harold Good of the Methodist Church in Ireland. In his address he said:

'we do well to remember the call of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah to his people in another troubled time and place when he challenged them to be 'prisoners of hope' rather than despair.

I love that phrase *'prisoners of hope.'*

100 years ago our forebears in this synod made the decision to be *'prisoners of hope'* by living out our ecumenical vocation in helping to create the Irish Council of Churches. Now one of the oldest ecumenical bodies in the world. Hope is the foundation on which the ICC continues to build.

The other preacher was Archbishop Eamon Martin, as we were also marking 50 years of the Irish Inter Church Meeting, founded in 1973 during one of the worst years of the troubles with the realisation that our togetherness in a deeply divided society would bring hope.

50 years after the Ballymascanlon talks the Archbishop said: *'it couldn't fail for its vision was inspired by the longing of our Saviour 'That they may be one, just as you Father are in me and I am in you.'* He went on *'For decades these words "that they may be one" have guided visionary people from our various traditions to boldly confront the reality and pain of our divisions and set out on a pilgrim journey, daring to dream of greater unity.'*

Archbishop I was greatly honoured to be president of the Irish Council of Churches during its centenary year. I believe that this synod has much to be thankful for and should feel blessed that over the last 100 years we have sought to live out our ecumenical vocation as active members of the ICC and as *'prisoners of hope'*.

In conclusion I remind members of the purpose of the commission *'To promote within the Church of Ireland the vision of Christian Unity.'* That must also mean a desire to work for unity both within the church we love, as well as with other churches. If unity is so high up our Lord's priority list, it must be a priority for us and if it's His priority it must surely be precious to us. Precious things need to be handled with care because precious things can be delicate. There is a real danger that we allow the fracturing culture of the world around us pollute the culture of the church. That is true with within the Church of Ireland and in our relationships with other churches. Our unity is a precious thing-handle with care!

Let us redouble our efforts to be part of the answer to the prayer of Jesus the *'they may be one.'*

Archbishop I propose that the report of the Commission for Christian unity and Dialogue be taken into consideration.