**The Work of the Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures**

The General Synod meeting in Dublin in May will consider proposals by the Commission on Episcopal Ministry and Structures (CEMS). Prior to the Synod, this and a further article aim to provide some background to the deliberations of CEMS to date; any legislation on matters relating to episcopal ministry and diocesan structures, of course, rests fully with members of the General Synod. Bills are proposed in two areas in May: one concerned with the procedures for the election of bishops and the other with provincial and diocesan boundaries (which will be the focus of the next article).

**Mission**

Established by Synod in 2012, and chaired by Mrs Ethne Harkness, CEMS takes as its primary focus the mission of the Church. Its members have been guided by the 2008 ‘Growth, Unity and Service’ mission statement by the House of Bishops: ‘In the power of the Spirit, our mission requires us to order our contemporary worship and life in a manner that nurtures growth, promotes unity and liberates us for service in the world that is God’s’.

CEMS has sought to make the best of the Church’s shared resources of people, time, buildings, facilities and finance and has considered the desirable skills of bishops and their training; the election of bishops; the key function and roles of bishops; models of episcopacy; resources needed to support bishops and their families; funding of episcopal ministry; diocesan, geographical and provincial structures and the role of the Archbishops of Armagh and of Dublin. Building on historical work (such as the commissions on episcopal needs in 1974 and 1995) and the statistical information produced by the 2013 church census, the Commission has engaged in very wide consultation and listened carefully to feedback from the 2014 paper ‘Vision and Principles for Episcopal Ministry and Structures’.

Readers will recall that at the General Synod in 2014, a resolution was passed requesting that a programme of induction and in-post training, development and ministerial review be taken forward by the bishops and that this received a positive response from the Archbishops and Bishops.

**Elections**

Last year at General Synod, a resolution was passed requesting the Commission to bring forward a Bill to reform the procedure for electing bishops, recognising the need for change. The Bill before Synod in 2016 will present a more robust system of election allowing the needs of a diocese and the gifts of individuals to be assessed in a more thorough and fairer way.

In the case of Armagh, the election of a new Archbishop would remain with the House of Bishops but would include the possibility of electing from elsewhere in the Anglican Communion. The House of Bishops would also receive input from the episcopal electors of the Diocese of Armagh by way of a statement of needs and a diocesan profile.

**Roles**

CEMS has considered the demands of the role of bishops and the expectations around episcopal presence at local events in some detail. While, of course, bishops must as pastors ‘know their flocks’, a balance needs to be found between leadership/oversight and direct involvement in local situations, allowing all to take responsibility and play their part in the mission of the Church. ‘Episcopal presence’ was also viewed in the light of large geographical diocesan areas; it was felt that the style of ‘bishopping’ in larger dioceses needs to accommodate the reality of geography. It is the view of the Commission that the idea of suffragan episcopal ministry (or area or assistant bishops) is not an appropriate innovation for the Church of Ireland at this time.

It is the Commission’s view that there is no theological or constitutional reason why a bishop may not also hold another ecclesiastical appointment (eg. as a Dean or incumbent), although there may be practical implications which would require resolution if that were to take place – CEMS is not proposing immediate constitutional change to provide expressly for this but it is felt that it might be worth consideration during future revision of the Constitution. CEMS also suggests that there are advantages to providing a flexible approach to a bishop moving from episcopal service in a diocese to a different ministerial role – while currently possible in theory it is not often contemplated. While CEMS is not recommending any constitutional amendment it does believe that the Church should be open to welcoming a move of this nature by a bishop who wishes to do so.

**Funding**

Episcopal arrangements need to be sustainable, transparent, equitable and fair to the tasks involved for bishops or those to whom tasks might need to be referred. At present, the episcopacy costs c. €2m per year, supported via trusts and endowments, a levy on each diocese and central church funding. Clearly, different models of episcopal organisation will have different financial implications.

However, as CEMS has stated before, in their consideration of the matters before them, members are not money-driven but are money-aware. In the short-term, the recommendations of CEMS will increase expenditure but in the longer term there will be financial savings combined with more effective support for episcopal ministry. Resources will not be about ‘keeping things going’ but directed towards growth, unity and service.

**Provincial Structures and Boundaries**

A further article on 22nd April will provide fuller context and information on proposed boundaries, while members of the General Synod will receive a leaflet ‘Diocesan Boundaries: Reaching Conclusions’, with maps, to aid their thinking at May’s Synod; however, it is fair to say that CEMS explored the issue of diocesan boundaries and the various options at great length. The Commission feels it is important for dioceses not to be too small numerically, otherwise people are left struggling and inhibited from development.

It is the clear view of the Commission that the two Church of Ireland Provinces – Armagh and Dublin – should remain, recognising the significance of our two political and legal jurisdictions for many aspects of church life and the complementary roles of the two Archbishops.

***Church of Ireland Press Office***