

The Report of the Church of Ireland/Methodist Covenant Council was presented to General Synod in Dún Laoghaire today. In its report the council recognises the need to build on the introduction of Interchangeability of Ministry and outlines a meeting (in December) between representatives of the House of Bishops and Methodist Conference to discuss the implementation of the Covenant.

Proposing the report, the Revd Barry Forde said that there had been lots of symbolic moments confirming interchangeability at both Synod and the Methodist Conference but stressed the importance of forming substance behind the show.

He said that the report highlighted key areas that needed to be addressed and steps being taken to do so. It had been agreed that there would now be a meeting of representatives of the House of Bishops, Conference, Home Missions and the Methodist President two or three times a year. He explained that aim was to develop strategic engagement, raise the visibility of the Covenant, respond to and instigate areas of work for Covenant Council. Such areas include:

a) Putting into place polities and protocols to enable interchangeability to work in practice. How might one cleric end up working in the other tradition? What steps are required? How might such an appointment happen?

b) How can we work together in the arena of lay readers and local preachers, providing recognition of the other and considering how to better work together?

c) How might our theological colleges continue to grow together?

d) What areas of mission are there across the island that might be better served by working together?

Mr Forde said the council believed it was important to revisit the Constitution and Manual Laws in order to facilitate the expressions of church that were growing in covenant together. It had not been made clear how such partnerships would work on the ground.

“Ecumenism will work from the ground up, but it is imperative that we do all we can to facilitate those who want to work together but who are often confused about how to make it happen,” Mr Forde said. “With the proposed revision to the constitution, Covenant Council encourages, and will continue to press for, much clearer provision to be made for covenant partnerships, alongside other expressions of church that should be allowed to sit alongside traditional models as we seek to grow the mission of the church of God.”

Seconding the report, Canon Maurice Elliott highlighted the high profile with the Covenant between the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland achieved across the wider ecclesial and ecumenical scene, including at the ACC in Lusaka. He added that there had been much positive awareness and appreciation of the realisation of interchangeability within the Irish context. He urged that the Covenant be celebrated as others outside the island have done.

“In other words, I think we need to learn to see the Covenant as others already see it, and we need to continue to embrace and to cherish what it represents and what it offers with a sense of confidence and joy. The danger for any such agreement is that it all too easily can become an ecumenical museum-piece. Members of Synod, our plea this morning is that we avoid allowing that to happen and instead re-commit ourselves to seeing the Covenant as a living endeavour which is rich in its potential and is a major milestone project which is viewed with genuine admiration and approbation by our brothers and sisters across the wider Anglican and Methodist worlds,” he concluded.

Points made during the debate included growth at a joint church initiative in Maghaberry, County Antrim, interchangeability and parish vacancies, and the development of joint ministries in Longford, Roscommon, Sligo and Leitrim alongside Presbyterian and Methodist colleagues and others from the Reformed tradition. Bishop Ferran Glenfield reported that scores of people were added to the Church following such an initiative in Holy Week in Sligo. The report of the Covenant Council was received. Further motions, approved by Synod, encouraged congregations to celebrate the Covenant relationship on or around John Wesley Day on 24th May each year and renewed the membership of the Covenant Council for the forthcoming year.