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## PRESS RELEASE

Pr 34/11

**Embargoed until Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2011, 10.30am**

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### **Archbishop of Armagh's Presidential Address General Synod 2011, Armagh**

The Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, the Most Revd Alan Harper, OBE, will open the 2011 General Synod with his presidential address on Thursday 12th May. The General Synod will take place in the Armagh City Hotel. The Archbishop's address will focus primarily on internal Church of Ireland General Synod matters. However, more broadly, he will refer to recent elections and to HM Queen Elizabeth II's forthcoming visit to the Republic of Ireland, and his prayer that 'those who remain discontent with the current political accommodations on this island may turn away permanently from violence and bloodshed and play their part in enabling the processes of peace and reconciliation to come to a richer fruition'. The Archbishop will say:

'Both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland recent elections have returned to power governments with fresh and commanding mandates to continue the process of building prosperous and cohesive communities. The challenges faced by governments in both jurisdictions and by the people whom they serve are unquestionably daunting ... Let me, therefore, say just two things to elected representatives and especially those in government:

- Our prayers for the needful gifts of wisdom and courage are with you as you undertake the discharge of your duties; and
- The Church of Ireland, as a significant stakeholder in the communities north and south, will endeavour to be a constructive partner with you in both jurisdictions.

'I am sure that the members of this synod will have noted with pleasure, as I have, the historic visit next week of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second to the Republic of Ireland at the invitation of President Mary McAleese. Many of us recall with great happiness the ground breaking visit of Her Majesty to Armagh in 2008 for the Service of the Royal Maundy and, later in the same year, the visit of President McAleese to the Meeting of the General Synod held in Galway. I rejoice that relationships between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom have so changed as to make the visit of Her Majesty possible. I salute the tireless efforts of President McAleese and Dr Martin McAleese in seeking to break down barriers and heal divisions in both parts of Ireland. I also pray earnestly, "on my knees", that those who remain discontent with the current political accommodations on this island may turn away permanently from violence and bloodshed and play their part in enabling the processes of peace and reconciliation to come to a richer fruition.'

*Full transcript below*

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## **Full transcript of the Archbishop's Presidential Address:**

### **GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND Armagh 2011**

Members of the General Synod,

I welcome you, together with our ecumenical and other guests, to the opening day of the third ordinary session of the Forty Seventh General Synod of the Church of Ireland. The Forty Seventh Synod has been notable, although not unique, for having so far incorporated three ordinary sessions and one special session. I shall refer to that special meeting of the General Synod later in my address.

Let me say at the outset that this address will not focus to any great extent on political or community issues. Both in this jurisdiction and in the Republic of Ireland recent elections have returned to power governments with fresh and commanding mandates to continue the process of building prosperous and cohesive communities. The challenges faced by governments in both jurisdictions and by the people whom they serve are unquestionably daunting. In the case of Northern Ireland we do not even yet know how the various portfolios are to be assigned. Let me, therefore, say just two things to elected representatives and especially those in government:

Our prayers for the needful gifts of wisdom and courage are with you as you undertake the discharge of your duties; and

The Church of Ireland, as a significant stakeholder in the communities north and south, will endeavour to be a constructive partner with you in both jurisdictions.

I am sure that the members of this synod will have noted with pleasure, as I have, the historic visit next week of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second to the Republic of Ireland at the invitation of President Mary McAleese. Many of us recall with great happiness the ground breaking visit of Her Majesty to Armagh in 2008 for the Service of the Royal Maundy and, later in the same year, the visit of President McAleese to the Meeting of the General Synod held in Galway. I rejoice that relationships between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom have so changed as to make the visit of Her Majesty possible. I salute the tireless efforts of President McAleese and Dr Martin

McAleese in seeking to break down barriers and heal divisions in both parts of Ireland. I also pray earnestly, “on my knees”, that those who remain discontent with the current political accommodations on this island may turn away permanently from violence and bloodshed and play their part in enabling the processes of peace and reconciliation to come to a richer fruition.

I now turn to matters internal to the Church of Ireland. I recognize that such issues rarely command media attention but, of course, they should and do command the attention of the General Synod.

It will not have escaped your notice that there have been some significant changes already in the make up of the Synod. I draw particular attention to the absences this year of the former Archbishop of Dublin, the Rt Revd Dr John Neill and of the former Bishop of Tuam, Killala and Achonry, the Rt Revd Dr Richard Henderson.

Archbishop John served the Church of Ireland in the ordained ministry for almost 42 years, 25 of those years as a bishop. In his leadership, successively, of the Dioceses of Tuam, Killala and Achonry; Cashel, Waterford, Lismore, Ossory, Ferns and Loughlin; and of Dublin and Glendalough, John Neill brought impressive pastoral gifts and a distinctive spirituality. His contribution to the counsels of the Church of God ecumenically, and especially of the Anglican Communion, the World Council of Churches, and the Porvoo Communion of Churches which embraces the Anglican Provinces of Britain and Ireland with the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia and the Baltic, has been immense.

Part of Archbishop John’s most recent work for the Anglican Communion stands before us for consideration at this session of the Synod in the form of the definitive text of the proposed Anglican Covenant. It is difficult and indeed invidious to attempt to evaluate the many components of John Neill’s ministry and I shall not attempt to do so save to say this: John Neill gave unstintingly of his wise counsel and generous friendship and for these things in particular he is much admired and will be much missed from the General Synod.

Bishop Richard Henderson left Ireland at the end of January this year to take up a post in the Diocese of Carlisle in the romantically named “Heart of Eden” Team Ministry. His humble and deeply spiritual pastoral ministry will, without doubt, endear him as much to his new parishioners as it did to the people of the Diocese of Tuam, Killala and Achonry, and before that the people of Abbeystrewry Union and Ross Union.

The Rt Revd Dr Richard Henderson brought to the ministry of the Church of Ireland a profound depth of scientific understanding. His capacity to draw together the insights of both science and religion made a rich contribution to the life of the Church, not least because of his capacity to express often complex ideas in accessible language. He was also in great demand as a giver of retreats. Indeed, one of Richard Henderson’s most heart felt desires was that a retreat house might be provided by and for the Church of

Ireland. He takes up his appointment in the Heart of Eden with the gratitude of all who knew him in the Church of Ireland for all that he has given to the life of the Church.

Meanwhile, although remaining a member of General Synod, Canon Lady Brenda Sheil has stepped down as an Honorary Secretary.

Lady Sheil was been a member of the Standing Committee for 23 years, 12 of those years as a Lay Honorary Secretary of the General Synod. She was also for a time one of our representatives on the Anglican Consultative Council (the ACC). Lady Sheil brought to the service of the Church the particular gifts of a barrister, including extensive experience in the drafting of legislation. The amount of work and specialist knowledge required for this is immense, and, in this respect Lady Sheil deployed her skill and industry unstintingly on behalf of the Church she so loved.

Lady Sheil is a daughter of the Diocese of Armagh. She is also a daughter of the rectory. It is that latter experience which made Brenda Sheil so committed and industrious a member of the Clergy Pensions Board. The clergy of the Church of Ireland owe much to the Pensions Board for its stewardship of their pensionable rights. They owe more, perhaps, to Brenda than to any other single person. Her tenacious championing of the interests of the clergy has been hugely significant, highly effective and deeply appreciated.

The retirement of Dr Neill and the resignation of Dr Henderson bring with them a series of changes in the membership of the House of Bishops. The Electoral College for the United Dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough elected the Rt Revd Dr Michael Jackson to be Archbishop of Dublin, Bishop of Glendalough, Primate of Ireland and Metropolitan. He took up his responsibilities as Archbishop on April 11th. I congratulate him warmly. We all look forward with great anticipation to the contribution he will make in his new role.

The translation of the new Archbishop from the See of Clogher has created a vacancy in that see. The process for electing a new bishop for Clogher will be completed in due course.

Meanwhile, a Special Meeting of the General Synod held in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, on March 5 rejected a bill which would have provided for a delay in calling the Electoral College for the See of Tuam. Consequently that Electoral College was held in Armagh on March 30. Subsequently at a meeting of the House of Bishops held on April 13 the Very Revd Patrick Rooke, Dean of Armagh, was elected to serve as the next Bishop of Tuam, Killala and Achonry. I warmly congratulate the Dean on his election. I look forward to presiding in due course (God willing) at his ordination and consecration as a Bishop of the Church of God. We all look forward to the contribution he will make to the life of the Church both in Tuam and more widely throughout Ireland.

I have already made two references to the holding of a Special Synod on March 5 and I should like to refer now not to the substance of the debate in Christ Church but to the passion which so many contributors to the discussion brought to the microphone.

It is passion that has been lacking in successive meetings of General Synods for many years. Many of our debates seem bloodless and to lack sustained engagement. The range and depth of the theological dialogue has sometimes seemed limited.

Part of this may be a result of the fact that the culture of Anglicanism militates towards measured debate, tolerance in embracing a breadth of theological perspectives, and, consequently, a reserved and polite demeanour easily interpreted as indifferentism.

Another part of the reason may be fear: fear of engendering or revealing splits within the Church. We know that in Ireland we have divisions enough to cope with and we don't want unnecessarily to strain further the bonds of affection. Thus we have been content to accommodate disagreement by avoiding careful, deep discussion.

It is essential to differentiate between engendering division and revealing division. No one, except those who are deliberately mischievous, wishes to engender division. Yet difference in sentiment and opinion is part of the human condition, and exploring differences provides opportunity for understanding, if not necessarily sharing, alternative views.

Such was the motivation behind the work of the Archbishops and Bishops of the Church of Ireland in publishing their Pastoral Letter on human sexuality in September 2003. That statement reflected the range of views represented among the bishops at that time. It also indicated that diversity need not be a source of irreconcilable division. It allowed for respectful listening to one another and defined a long term objective of achieving an informed "consensus fidelium."

In this respect the statement underscored the principle that, in circumstances of substantial disagreement, change in an established position is inappropriate. The strength of that principle is that prophetic witness, responsibly expressed, is enabled but scrutinized in order to discern whether "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us." Its weakness is that it tends to preclude the Gamaliel Principle which is that latitude should be permitted because, if a particular change or movement is not of God it will wither away, if it is of God it will prosper, and woe to the one who sets his face against what God is doing.

Sadly we live in an age of short attention spans in which nuanced discussion is largely discounted, whilst "sound-bite" journalism and trivialisation by the media reduce serious discussion to vanishing point. There isn't appetite for considered debate unless it involves sensational elements, preferably sex, scandal and conflict. The agenda and debates of the Church of Ireland General Synod only occasionally fall into such categories.

Having said that, it has to be admitted that when I turn to the Book of Reports which provides much of the substance for our work in General Synod – 406 pages of solid print this year – I read the record of an immense amount of labour, much description of what has been reported and discussed, many worthy and Godly sentiments and intentions, but few sparks that will set the heather ablaze. That is, until I turn to page 402.

In the compass of three pithy pages, the Archdeacon of Tuam has sounded the death knell of the Church of Ireland as we know it. Certainly the prognosis he describes sounds terminal.

He describes a condition of decline in traditional forms of religious observance; widespread apathy; numerical decline. “For sure,” he writes, “in 20 years time, or possibly before that, many small rural churches will either have gone, or be on their last legs.” He describes an ageing church population with an increasingly wide gap between the young and the next age group. “A cord has been cut, the tradition of osmotically passing on the faith, combined with weekly church attendance, is past.” “Metaphors of cancer and the Titanic may be too dramatic, it’s more a matter of slow, quiet, respectable deflation, a gentle haemorrhaging allowing us to drift off to sleep in the damp but hallowed halls of elder glory.” Meanwhile Christianity will re-polarise around contemporary issues, most likely liberal versus conservative. He therefore calls for a bit of “crystal ball gazing” to find out where the ship is going down, how fast and what sort of lifeboats we may need to design.

Startlingly, the archdeacon ends his piece by denying that all is doom and gloom. Rather, “There is quite clearly a period of catharsis ahead of us and the Church of Ireland will not come through it unchanged.” He anticipates new life through catharsis but, so to speak, “not as we know it.”

Catharsis is purgation: in Aristotle’s “Poetics” it is a purification of the emotions through some vicarious experience. That which is cathartic is a purgative - a cleanser of the bowels. Catharsis is a clear out, a sovereign remedy for that kind of constipation from which, periodically, my computer suffers, requiring the work of a clean-up wizard and a defragmentation programme.

The article in question is Appendix A to the Report of the Commission on Ministry, but its substance extends far beyond the narrow confines of a consideration of what we normally think of as ministry. This is about the state of the Church of Ireland. It is a “wake up and smell the coffee” moment and it is to the General Synod that the wake up call is initially directed. Perhaps, therefore, we need to start with the General Synod.

It is my opinion that meetings of the General Synod, whether or not they gain the notoriety which will influence the wider world, should aim to inform, reform and stimulate the Church of Ireland. I assume that we are committed to the view that the mission of the Church of Ireland is largely exercised in and through the parishes and dioceses, but that it should be enabled, resourced and stimulated by the General Synod. I see little evidence that this is the case. I especially see little evidence of the passionate

engagement that ought to reverberate around the Church to animate its life. How ironic that the only passion displayed in recent years emerged at this year's Special Synod, where it was deployed in defence of the status quo. It is time, indeed, to wake up and smell the coffee. So here is what I think.

Tough decisions are now required about what we expect of General Synod and what we want Synod to achieve:

Is it merely a meeting to rubber stamp or, at best, mildly critique the reports before it?

Is it simply a parliamentary style assembly to consider legislation affecting the internal polity of the Church?

Is it a body that considers the work and recommendations of committees and then actually does something, advocating specific action in the light of the gospel?

Are major reports placed before us simply to defend historic rights and privileges or have we important things to say on social, educational and justice issues?

Or, are we here to address things that we are passionate about and to do something about them?

It seems to me that a very strong case can be made for separating the legislative and governance functions of the General Synod from consideration of committee reports that are (or ought to be) missional in character. We might do well to hold two one and a half day synods a year (say Friday to Saturday), dealing with legislation and governance at one and the mission of the Church in society at the other.

If legislation and governance arouse little passion, discussion of the mission of the Church in society surely should. I think we need to ask, "What are we passionate about? Is it evangelization? If so we have to do much more than merely tell people that they have to be saved because the Bible says so! Most people never read the Bible. Most probably do not accept its authority as greater than that of any other significant book. Most people probably believe that science disproves much if not most of it, and anyway are more interested in making a living and enjoying themselves, not associating church life with enjoyment!

Evangelism is, first and foremost, about making friends and standing alongside to serve them, not primarily to make them members but to make their lives richer. Conversion is the work of the Spirit, conversation and concern is the work of the Christian.

If we are passionate about evangelization then we have to be passionate about children, the family, social justice and education. Here is an abbreviated and random list, an incomplete illustration of the kind of issues you and I should care about and respond to if we are committed to sharing the love of God:

Are we passionate about child care? One of the major problems for women in the workplace is access to affordable child care or after school care. It is too expensive. What could the Church do? When did we last discuss the principles of the educational and social needs of the child: home circumstances, child poverty, child neglect, family stability? What have we to offer that may support and enhance the life chances of

children? Are we ready to advocate increased taxation to provide for higher standards? Are we prepared to collaborate in providing services the state refuses or is incapable of providing? That surely is the acid test of our commitment, on Christ's behalf, to the little children: to bring them into the centre rather than push them to the periphery.

Are we passionate about education? We invest huge amounts of time, money and energy in education at primary and secondary level, but what do we think about the role of education in reinforcing existing stereotypes and divisions in society? What must be done to address educational inequalities and the shortfall in educational aspiration, especially among young working class males? Are we concerned about the cost to the student of a university education or, indeed, about its quality and appropriateness in all circumstances?

Are we passionate about divisions in society: about sectarianism, racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, multiculturalism, integration and multi-faith dialogue? Of course we are! As a church we have a track record of attempting to address some of these difficult things. But worthy beginnings do not guarantee progress to completion.

Are we passionate about the environment, ecology, bio-diversity, climate change? What do we actually know about any of these things? How do we as a church, but more particularly as a synod of ordinary folk, engage with the responsibilities of stewardship, the ethics of ecology and the theology of creation?

When did we last discuss medical ethics, assisted pregnancy, organ donation, end of life issues?

Are we passionate about justice, the justice system, the cost of access to justice, prison regimes, sentencing policy, alternatives to custody, and mental health and substance abuse - serious issues among prison populations? I guess we are, but, as with other issues we do not seem able to muster the expertise, urgency or commitment to do more than we have always done, and thus we neither come alongside those affected nor advocate effectively for the things which should concern us all.

Everyone here, I suspect, is concerned about the economy, poverty, debt, and the consequences of these things for the lives and life chances of our fellow citizens. We are yet again haemorrhaging (that word again!) home grown talent and especially young people. Have we any wisdom to offer? Have we any expertise drawn from within the Church of Ireland to offer? Most importantly have we structures and mechanism which would help us to operate effectively, or is that someone else's business? How can we pretend to get worked up about such things and have no strategy for response?

Are we structured, as a Church, to provide more than a chaplaincy service among assigned parishioners?

Ultimately any responses we make as a church to these or any other pressing issues have to be implemented not in synod but in the dioceses and parishes. The synod can often

only ask the questions, raise consciences and sometimes propose solutions. It should not, however, look for the easy way out. The easy way out is to write things down in reports, mutter assent (or dissent) in Synod, and then return home after what may seem to outsiders to have been little more than an expensive annual re-union. Therefore I want to say some trenchant things about how we might experiment to make our proceedings more relevant and less inclined to be a remedy for insomnia.

The Constitution of the Church of Ireland, not a notably flexible document, provides within Standing Orders a device for the initiation of what might turn out to be the catharsis referred to by the Archdeacon of Tuam. Standing Orders 58-64 lay down procedures for conducting (behind closed doors) a “Consideration of the General State of the Church”. Thus we are not shackled in all respects by the dominance of a largely retrospective, formal agenda. Perhaps we need to see this measure not as an emergency provision but as an encouragement to take stock. So, in respect of the business of the General Synod, here goes:

1. Chairmanship. Is it necessary that the President of the Synod should also be wholly responsible for the chairmanship of the Synod. Yes he can hand over to a fellow bishop from time to time but why should we not provide for the creation of a panel of persons, including lay people, identified as endowed with the requisite skills and experience, who would chair, by prior arrangement, specific sessions of each year’s synod?
2. Let’s consider dividing the business of the General Synod between governance and mission and let’s consider separating those sessions accordingly.
3. We are here, in Synod, to hold one another, as well as the world, to account. Why not, then, open up conversation by providing time for Questions directed to reporting bodies? Questions submitted in advance might be answered by a spokesperson for the relevant body. Supplementary questions might follow. If such a device were adopted it would surely not be necessary to present and discuss every report contained in the Book of Reports every year.
4. Ought we not deliberately to set out to have a general discussion about the state of the Church on a regular basis, perhaps at the end of each triennium? Why not use our triennial structure?
5. I also favour discussion of committee reports on a triennial rota. This would save vast amounts of time in the preparation of detailed annual committee reports; it should save considerable space and therefore expense in publishing the Book of Reports each year; and it would enable a major discussion of major topics after mature and final consideration by the committee or commission concerned.
6. If such a device were to free up agenda time, might we also consider seeking from each diocese a verbal report and presentation to the General Synod articulating the issues that are regarded locally as urgent and relevant? With a bit of imagination there might be four such brief reports each year, again ordered on a rota basis, so that each diocese may

make one presentation in each triennium. It would be an opportunity to share information, celebrate initiative and be better known and understood by one another. Better still, if the dioceses concerned each year were collaboratively to share perspectives and identify common concerns we might make better progress in sharing and bearing one another's burdens.

7. Might it be possible to find agenda time for generic topics, not necessarily in response to written reports or set texts but introduced, perhaps, by someone whose passion is roused? What about "God in the inner city", "God in the suburbs", "God at the mart and farm gate", "God in business and industry", "God in government", "God on the sports field", "God in the armed forces", "God behind bars". How might we feel about giving the floor to people, from our dioceses or the wider community, who have expertise to share and who understand the issues? If we so choose they need not be Synod members, just persons who have something to say and insights to offer. Our task would be to reflect and respond and assist the Church of Ireland by doing so.

Please note, I have said nothing about changing diocesan boundaries, reducing the number of bishops, nor even about changing the numbers or pattern of representation at the General Synod. I am more interested in making the meetings of the General Synod more worthwhile, more energizing, more dynamic and better equipped to command appropriate attention. The General Synod could be a platform for what is best and most creative in the life of our church. It seems to have lost that capacity. I want us to remake it.

I have been pleading for ways to bring more passion into the life of the General Synod, but let me point out that the root meaning of the word passion is "suffering". Nothing worthwhile is without cost. Are we prepared to make sacrifices in order to serve God and the people of Ireland? If the answer is "no", so be it; but please, if the answer is even a guarded "yes", don't tell me what the problems are, tell me what the solutions are.

Let our membership and participation in the business of the General Synod be a sign not a sinecure in the wilderness of this world.

Let us embrace catharsis. Let us become a synod of "dunamis", of power, of energy and of purpose.  
ENDS

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