



From Northern Ireland

Harry Uprichard reports on the church situation in Ulster.

Once again the months of May and June have featured the annual meetings of the larger church denominations in Ireland. The Church of Ireland, a branch of the Anglican communion, met in General Synod in Dublin, the Roman Catholic bishops (who meet four times a year) at Maynooth, the Methodist Conference in Bangor, Co. Down, and the Presbyterian General Assembly in Belfast.

Matters of government were as ever the focus of attention and were duly probed by the media. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was a subject of lively discussion and widespread criticism, certainly from the Protestant view-point. Some Church of Ireland opinion insisted that by now the British government had had time to recognize the degree of opposition to the Accord. It was high time to put the Agreement into cold storage or suspension. At the very least, a 'Mark 2' version of the Accord should be produced.

Presbyterians continued to underline the fundamental defects in the scheme and the massive opposition it incurred. A new approach was necessary. An alternative solution must be forthcoming. Meantime, politicians could help the situation by a willingness to say something other than 'No'. Methodists had some hard words to say about the political leaders. They blamed them for holding on to the past in an unhealthy way and for their lack of constructive ideas. There must be talk without prior conditions and more flexibility, even if there was a justifiable disagreement with the Anglo-Irish Accord.

Inter-Church relations usually provides a vital point of interest in the various meetings. Since the publication of the Lima Document by the W.C.C., the ecumenical movement seems to be regrouping itself to move forward. After a period of working at grass roots level, the impetus is moving again into the sphere of official church gatherings. The ARCIC Report on Salvation and the Church produced some reaction from the church of Ireland Synod and the Roman Catholic bishops.

Some from the Church of Ireland seemed happy with the Report's analysis that the Reformation was simply a former misunderstanding and that now there was general consensus on the doctrine of justification by faith. They were looking forward to the Lambeth Conference in 1988 developing these relations further as well as providing the opportunity for reviewing important issues such as Ministry and Anglicanism in the Third World.

Roman Catholic bishop P. Devine was questioned on the subject of indulgences within his church, arising out of an interview on ARCIC II. He was of the opinion that the Lutheran perception of an indulgence as a bargain struck with God through a priest as a method of salvation was a caricature. He claimed that indulgences relied on the intercessory power of prayer by the church. They should be seen from the point of view of the solidarity of the church enabling members to help one another and enabling Christ to work through them as His body.

At the other end of the theological spectrum, some Presbyterians questioned the value of the current Tripartite Conversations Between Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian within their inter-church activities. Some agreement having been reached on baptism and communion, the talks were now felt to be at a deadlock on the issue of ministry. The Presbyterian moderator for

the ensuing year is Dr William Fleming, who strongly criticises the Ecumenical Movement while advocating a biblical ecumenism.

Internal church matters naturally occupy a sizeable amount of discussion time. There was a fair degree of interest in the ministry from a practical point of view. The Church of Ireland continued to express concern about the pressures of pastoral ministry. Bishops were urged to be yet more assiduous in their care for the clergy as pastores parochiarum. Presbyterians discussed a new salary scheme for ministers aimed at ironing out present discrepancies, relating salary to work-load. This was remitted to presbyteries for further consideration. They also examined difficulties involved in ministers living in a manse as a 'tied house' particularly on their approach to retirement.

The subject of women in the ministry again came to the fore. The Church of Ireland is now in the process of ordaining women as deacons and it was claimed that there was quite a strong body of opinion within that communion in favour of moving to the next logical step of ordination to the priesthood. This was related to the ongoing debate within the Church of England on the matter. While it was felt by some that there was no theological objection to the ordination of women to the priesthood, the divisiveness of this position to ecumenism, especially with the Roman Catholic Church, was recognised.

This same issue came up in the Presbyterian Assembly in quite a remarkable way and from a very different view-point. During the discussion of a report which listed students for the ministry recommended for the church's theological college, exception was taken by one member of Assembly to the inclusion of the names of female students in the list. Eventually, all the students, male and female, were recommended. However, 41 members registered dissent, including many of the younger ministers of the Assembly. It is interesting that this should have arisen in a church which for some years now has accepted women in the ministry. Perhaps it indicates a change of attitude.

The Roman Catholic bishops gave some attention to the place of the laity within the church. It was felt that today the traditional role of the laity 'to read, obey, pray and pay' was outmoded. Following suggestions in Vatican II, it was hoped to introduce participation by the laity in the area of liturgy, though it was recognised that previous moves in this general direction had met with a certain amount of opposition. Lay involvement in pastoral councils to help in the running of the parish and in social work was also mooted.

Indeed, as is usually the case, social issues received interest and attention from all the denominations, with statements on the problem of AIDS and concern about poverty, unemployment, homelessness and ministry to down-town city areas. In all, a fair amount of discussion on worthwhile church affairs.