

DIOCESAN SYNOD 7 MARCH 2009

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

ITEM 4: TRANSFORMING THE WORLD

In the motion the first bullet point should read ‘...”Moral **but** no Compass” ...’.

ITEM 5: DEANERIES

Please delete the words ‘and Wootton’ from line 2 of the agenda item.

ITEM 12: TIME FOR QUESTIONS

10 questions have been submitted in accordance with Standing Order 70.

All ten questions are addressed to the Chair of the Board of Education and are linked to proposals concerning Unity College in Northampton. In response to them the Archdeacon of Northampton makes the following preliminary statement:

Statement from the Chair of the Board of Education

‘Many members of Synod will be aware that there has been considerable public debate about the proposal to change the status of Unity College from a Church of England VA School to a Church of England Academy. The Diocesan Board of Education has at all times had one concern: the provision of the best possible educational experience for the present and future students at the school. It remains the Board’s conviction that the Academy route is most likely to secure that end.

The questions which have been submitted to Synod have mostly been aired – and answered – already through various public media and (in some cases) personally to the questioners. Before I again give brief answers to the specific questions, I believe that Synod deserves to be aware of some context to the debate and matters of fact about the process.

First, the suggestion that Academy status should be explored was put to officers of the Board and the Local Authority by the Schools Commissioner as far back as 2007. It was suggested that we work in partnership with certain other local schools and this was resisted, because we felt that they were inappropriate and we, too, wanted to see if greater improvements could be made some other way. However, the pressure from government to take further swift action continued, and after careful consideration the Board agreed that seeking Academy status would provide the best possibility for rapid improvement. This discussion was under way before the current Head was appointed.

Secondly, Academy status gives the school far greater freedom in curriculum development and the use of funds than VA status. It also releases additional funding that is not available to VA schools. We know it is not a cure-all: but it is a remedy that contains all the necessary ingredients to effect a good recovery.

Thirdly, the Department for Children, Schools and Families required us to “fast-track” the process (in effect achieving in one year what is often done in two. We are not alone in the country in this, but when the suggestion was first made we resisted it strongly. However, despite our best efforts the DCSF would not allow any variation to their rigid time scale, insisting that we pursue Academy status according to their agenda, and

which at the end of the day we were powerless to resist. It remains a matter which we still regret and from which many of the problems have arisen.

Finally, members should also note that throughout this process the Board has publicly acknowledged its own failings in aspects of the process. That they have been exacerbated by outside pressures is not an excuse in itself for some errors, and we acknowledge that and trust that Christians will understand and accept that nothing has been done without good intention.'

The individual questions and responses follow:

1. Mr John, Kidney, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

'Does the Diocese believe Margaret Gwynne (principal since June 2008) has been treated in an appropriate, caring, Christian way?'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

'We have sought to behave in a Christian way to all those affected by the current process within the constraints placed upon us by legislation and the requirements of a secular government department.'

2. Mr John, Kidney, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

'The Diocese is aware that there has been a great deal of correspondence between diocesan clergy, (including Bishops Cundy, White and Flack and Archdeacon Allsopp) and parishioners on the subject of Unity College and the treatment of Margaret Gwynne. As a Christian organisation committed to truth and openness will the Diocese ensure that copies of all this correspondence are forwarded to the Local Authority Cabinet Member and the Secretary of State, to support the official report that is being prepared by the independent management company?'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

'Much of the correspondence we have received has been copied by the senders to other parties. The County Council's statutory consultation process regarding the closure of Unity is the proper channel for comments to be made rather than through the diocese. '

3. Mr Colin Britcher, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

'How many schools does the Diocese have that are currently subject to OFSTED measures?'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

'Three out of 104 Church of England Schools in this Diocese are currently in Special Measures, including Unity College.'

4. Mr Colin Britcher, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

'The Diocese is the organisation that has been strategically responsible for the failure of Unity College. What makes the Diocese believe it suddenly has the credibility and competence to improve Unity College?'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

'The failure of a school to reach government targets arises from many complex factors and can never be laid at the door of any one person or group. Not least among the factors at Unity are the special needs of a multi-cultural school where over 60 different languages are spoken. Unity College was already struggling when it became a Church of England School and one of the first "Dearing Schools" specifically set up to serve students in difficult educational situations.

It is important to recognise that the Board of Education has a supportive role in Church Schools, and is not itself responsible for the detailed outcomes of the school. That is vested by the Education Acts solely with the local authority. Indeed, Church Schools are under no obligation to provide the Diocese with their performance data unless they choose to share it. The Board does of course seek to work in partnership with the three local education authorities which cover the diocese when schools face difficulties, and the Board's input has been identified by OfSTED reports as being central to moving a number of schools forward and improving their standards.

Teachers and governors, supported by the diocese, have pursued various ways of seeking improvements. We are now in a position where moving to Academy status offers the best hope of releasing the additional resources which are desperately needed to tackle the specific problems faced by the school in its unique social and community setting.'

5. Mrs Brenda Blundell, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

'Why have the feeder LEA schools not been informed of the academy proposals despite many of their pupils transferring to Unity in September 2009?'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

'This was a matter for the County Council, and which they have already addressed publicly.'

6. Mrs Brenda Blundell, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

'Is Vanessa Ray currently working for the Holy Trinity Academy (working title) project, of which the Diocese is lead sponsor and, if so, who is funding her?'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

'Mrs Ray is currently using her personal time to make preparations for the possible acceptance of the Academy proposal.. She will be taking on the role of Principal-Designate on 1 April 2009 and will then be paid by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).'

7. Mr David Johnson, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

‘What options other than fast track academies were considered?’

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

Options to give support to Unity College from other schools, including options for federations, were discussed by the Schools Commissioner with officers from the Board and the Local Authority in 2007 but soon moved to the suggestion of an academy. The DCSF made it clear to the Diocese and the other sponsors in September 2008 that the only way forward was that of a fast track academy.

8. Mr David Johnson, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

‘Has the diocese taken any account of the overwhelming ballots by staff, governors, parents and pupils against this proposal. At the governors meeting all voting governors voted in favour of the motion below. Out of those 12 governors 6 were foundation governors appointed by the diocese, so again are the diocese taking any notice of this and the ballots?’

At an additional, full Governing Body meeting held at Unity College on the evening of Thursday, January 22nd, the following proposal was agreed:

"After a period of intensive consultation with staff, students and parents, the Governing Body rejects the proposal to convert Unity College to an academy in September 2009 for the following reasons:

- 1) The Sponsors' poor communication and consultation;
- 2) The Sponsors' inability to demonstrate how becoming an academy will be of benefit to the students and staff of Unity College;
- 3) The erosion of trust between the Unity College community and the Sponsors;
- 4) The pursuit of the fast-track process will continue to be detrimental to students because of the lack of continuity and stability with relation to curriculum provision;
- 5) The fast-track process is having a negative impact on staff morale, recruitment and retention.

We believe the best approach for the Unity College community is to develop the college under its present governance for the next three years, whilst exploring the options of a properly-managed move to trust or academy status.

Governors are committed to promote and uphold the Christian values, ethos and practice upon which the college is founded. This will include embracing and respecting other faiths within the community and fully supporting those of no faith.

We wish to engage actively with parents, the community and the local authority to continue to raise standards in an already improving college."

Voting on the proposal was as follows:

Approved 12

Against 0

Abstained 2 (due to conflict of interest) Absent 3

Two Associate Governors also present do not have voting rights.'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

‘Of course the sponsors have noted the comments and the voting figures of the governors, and these will also be noted by the County Council and the Secretary of

State who alone are responsible for making the final decisions. But they will also take note of the fact that in the responses from parents to the initial questionnaire, 43% stated they were in favour of an Academy, and 45% against. It is important that everyone listens – to everyone.'

9. Mr Keith Davidson, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

'Referring to the 'consultation' on the proposed change of Unity College, Northampton, into an academy now proceeding and bearing in mind that it appears the decision for an academy has already been taken (Mrs Vanessa Ray having been appointed as Head Teacher) and that the word 'consultation' means 'a meeting to seek information or advice from' those attending, how will the advice so obtained be evaluated, what criteria will be applied to it and in the event of that advice being against an academy and in favour of the existing Unity College will Mrs. Margaret Gwynne, the existing Head Teacher be re-appointed and Mrs. Ray lose her appointment?'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

'No decisions have been taken and cannot be taken other than by the County Council and the Secretary of State. If they decide not to close Unity College and change its status to an Academy, all the current staff naturally retain their existing posts.'

10. Mr Keith Davidson, Greater Northampton Deanery, to the Chair of the Board of Education

'Bearing in mind that until 20004 Unity College, Northampton, was a community school, its history of being a faith school is very short and the Church is blessed in that its current Head Teacher, Mrs. Margaret Gwynne, is a practising Christian, and during the very short time there as head she is acknowledged to be turning the school round, is not the appointment of Mrs. Vanessa Ray, a non practicing Christian (if she were a practicing Christian she would by now have said so) as Head of an Academy incredible and should she not stand down?'

Response from the Chair of the Board of Education

'It is regrettable that Christians have joined in the comparisons that are being made in public about personalities and in the hurtful attacks that have been made on the Principal-designate, because our faith suggests better ways of handling disputes. Employment law clearly states that in any such appointment the person must be appointed who is considered to have the most suitable skills for the *totality* of the complex educational and managerial task for which they are being interviewed. Many heads of Church Schools are not active church members but none the less they are faithful in maintaining the Christian ethos of their schools.'

Mrs Ray has already pledged herself, if the Academy proposal is accepted by the Secretary of State, to uphold the Christian ethos of the school. As in all Church Schools, the Academy will be required to fulfil the Diocesan Expectations with regard to the provision of worship and Religious Education (including specific Christian content), as well as nurturing a community in which all people, and all faiths, are treated with respect and where students are given specific opportunities to explore the spiritual dimensions of human life.'