



Church of Ireland – Parish Handbook

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

This overview aims to provide a basic understanding of the Church of Ireland, its structure, members and system of governance.

BACKGROUND

ANGLICAN COMMUNION

The Church of Ireland is part of the worldwide communion of Anglican churches, which are in fellowship together and teach, worship and are organised in a similar way. It is a catholic and reformed church which traces its roots to the earliest days of Irish Christianity.

Church of Ireland services generally follow an accepted liturgical form and structure, based on one prayer book, the *Book of Common Prayer (2004)*. It keeps a balance in doctrine and worship between Scripture and Sacrament. The Sacrament of Holy Communion (also known as the Eucharist) is a central act of worship.

PROVINCES, DIOCESES AND PARISHES

The Church of Ireland is one church with over 450 parishes in 12 dioceses which cover the whole island of Ireland.

Each parish corresponds to a geographical area in which there will usually be (or have been) at least one church, overseen by a member of the clergy. Each church is managed by a select vestry which manages certain activities for the parish. Smaller parishes may be joined together in a union under one select vestry or joined together in a group retaining individual select vestries.

A diocese contains many parishes under the oversight of a bishop. Each diocese contains at least one cathedral, which is the bishop's traditional 'seat'. Each of the 12 dioceses come under one of the two provinces in Ireland, either Armagh or Dublin, each with an archbishop. Of the two, the Archbishop of Armagh is the senior, and is known as the Primate of all Ireland.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

Traditionally, the meaning of a member was someone who was received into the Church of Ireland by the traditional rites of baptism and confirmation. Now it is commonly accepted to include anyone who identifies themselves as sharing the Church of Ireland faith within the Anglican Communion. When a person states that they are a member of the Church of Ireland, there is an implicit acceptance by them of the beliefs, rules and regulations of the church.

According to the General Directions for Public Worship in the *Book of Common Prayer*, members of the Church of Ireland should join in public worship, partake in Holy Communion and give generously towards the ministry and mission of the church and to works of charity.

CLERGY ORDERS AND OFFICES

The three orders of ordained ministry in the Church of Ireland are bishops (which includes archbishops), priests, and deacons.

After ordination, deacons serve as curates, usually assisting and receiving guidance from the incumbent of a parish. A priest who is appointed to a parish of their own will often be the incumbent, will reside in the parish, and may serve as a rector, a vicar, or a priest-in-charge.

In each diocese there are one or more archdeacons who are usually also incumbents of parishes. If the bishop is absent from the diocese the archdeacon will usually be appointed as the bishop's commissary to act in the bishop's name during the absence.

The senior member of the clergy serving in a cathedral is a dean. Many cathedrals also have parochial responsibilities, and the dean may also be the incumbent of the cathedral parish. Cathedrals also have 'chapters' of clergy, which have certain functions of administration of the cathedral. Members of chapters have the title of 'canon'.

A small number of priests may go on to become consecrated as bishops and archbishops.

Chapter IV of the *Constitution* covers the detail of clergy appointment to, and tenure of, cures.

READERS

Readers are lay members of the church from all walks of life who are theologically trained and licensed by a bishop to preach, teach, lead worship and assist in pastoral, evangelistic and liturgical work. Lay readers are an important part of the church and a valuable support to clergy and parish congregations.

Readers may be either diocesan readers or parish readers and the scope of their ministry and roles differs across the dioceses. Lay readers are not authorised to take services of Holy Communion but may assist if authorised by the bishop to do so.

THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

The *Book of Common Prayer 2004* (with the amendments subsequently authorised by General Synod) contains rules relating to the worship of the church. Most of the services used in the Church of Ireland, including Morning and Evening Prayer and the central act of worship of Holy Communion, along with general directions for public worship, can be found in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

CHURCH GOVERNANCE

Most aspects of Church life are affected by a State or church rule of some sort, or informed by established practice.

STATE LAW

As a voluntary association, members of the Church of Ireland and its administrative units are subject in the first instance to the laws of the jurisdiction in which they live and work. This means all church activity must comply with State law.

DISESTABLISHMENT

The Irish Church Act 1869 (which took effect on 1 January 1871) severed the union between the Church of England and the Church of Ireland and ended the role of the Church of Ireland as the State church – the *disestablishment* of the Church of Ireland. At that time, various measures were undertaken both by the Houses of Parliament in Westminster and the church itself which are important to understanding the church's governance today:

- The Irish Church Act 1869 made the ecclesiastical law as it stood on 31st December 1870 the law of the Church of Ireland
- The *Constitution of the Church of Ireland* was settled at a meeting of representatives of the church known as the General Convention
- The Representative Church Body was formed as the corporate trustee for the church

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

At the General Convention in 1870 the members drafted the *Constitution of the Church of Ireland* which remains the principal source of rules and regulations which govern the administration of the church and sets out procedures for diocesan and parish governance. The *Constitution* may only be amended, altered or added to by the General Synod (discussed below).

SYNODICAL GOVERNANCE

The diocesan and parochial structure and synodical system of governance of the Church of Ireland which is in place today is essentially the same as was put in place in 1871 when the church was disestablished.

A synod is a council convened to discuss ecclesiastical business. The Church has two levels of synod:

- The General Synod is the legislative body for the church
- Beneath the General Synod, diocesan synods conduct the business of the local dioceses
- Beneath each diocesan synod, select vestries make local level decisions in the parishes

GENERAL SYNOD

Each diocese of the Church of Ireland elects people who will represent the diocese at the General Synod which is the law-making authority within the Church of Ireland. As such, the General Synod has primary responsibility for church governance, policy, doctrine and liturgy.

Membership of the General Synod is drawn from the lay and clergy members of the church and consists of the House of Bishops (which has 10 bishops and 2 archbishops) and the House of Representatives which has 216 clergy and 432 lay members. Elected members serve for a three-year period.

The General Synod meets annually around May for three days and is presided over by the Archbishop of Armagh (known as the President of General Synod). (Chapter I of *The Church of Ireland Constitution* provides more detailed information on the election of members to, and proceedings at, the General Synod.)

WHAT DOES THE GENERAL SYNOD DO?

The primary purpose of the General Synod is to enact legislation for the whole Church of Ireland.

Legislative matters are proposed in the form of a bill submitted to the General Synod. If passed by the members of the General Synod, it becomes an Act of the Statutes of the General Synod at which point it is binding on the church. Statutes can affect the Constitution, the liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer, or other areas. All of the Statutes passed since 1870 are listed in the annual Journal of the General Synod which is available from the RCB, the RCB Library or at anglican.ireland.org.

The General Synod considers less formal proposals as motions, which, if passed, become resolutions which inform church life. The General Synod also receives reports from various church committees and boards which are reported to and, if necessary, debated by, the members.

WHO CARRIES OUT THE WORK OF GENERAL SYNOD?

The Standing Committee carries out the work of the General Synod during the year between each annual meeting. There are additional committees of the Standing Committee which focus on particular specialist areas of business. The day-to-day work of supporting the General Synod and its numerous committees is carried out by the Synod Services department and Communications department of the RCB.

DIOCESAN SYNODS

Diocesan synods consist of the bishop and clergy of a diocese (or united dioceses), together with lay members who are elected from the membership of the general vestries within the diocese(s), at the Easter Vestry. (Chapter II of the *Constitution* provides more detailed information on the membership and proceedings of diocesan synods.)

A diocesan synod makes decisions by way of resolutions and motions. It may make, rescind and vary standing orders for the regulation of its procedure (subject to the *Constitution*) and may make rules and regulations regarding property, finance and employment which apply to the dioceses and to individual parishes within the dioceses. Many decisions made by the diocesan synod require the approval of the RCB, particularly in matters where property is vested in the RCB.

Most dioceses have a printed booklet of their standing orders and diocesan rules, which are available from the diocesan secretary. Amendments to diocesan rules are notified to the General Synod

Each diocese has a diocesan synod, a diocesan council and various committees to deal with certain aspects of the life and administration of the diocese.

DIOCESAN COUNCILS

A diocesan council is the organisation which carries out the work of the diocesan synod. It is appointed from members of the diocesan synod and includes the bishop together with a number of lay and clergy members as determined by the diocesan synod. Its responsibilities include the on-going management of diocesan finances, employment and property and it is accountable to the diocesan synod.

Offices which are generally included in a diocesan council include a diocesan secretary, accountant, director of ordinands, communications officer, youth officer, lay ministry coordinator, and others who work to provide support to and coordinate the activities of the parishes within the diocese.

REPRESENTATIVE CHURCH BODY

The Representative Church Body ('RCB') was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1870 under the Irish Church Act 1869. Its legal structure is that of a statutory corporate trustee, established to act as a trustee for the Church of Ireland. It is governed by the *Constitution* and accountable both to the General Synod (in relation to church regulations) and to the State authorities (in relation to its responsibilities as trustee). It operates through the members of the Representative Church Body elected or approved by diocesan synods and its employees.

The RCB exists to serve and support the church, principally by holding property on trust on behalf of the Church of Ireland and administering funds in accordance with the underlying trusts. As a corporate trustee with perpetual succession, it does not have to appoint individual named trustees to hold assets on trust. The RCB is the legal owner of the majority of Church of Ireland churches, graveyards, halls and glebes in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is also the trustee of various Church investments.

RCB MEMBERSHIP

The membership of the RCB consists of the archbishops and bishops (*ex-officio*), members elected by the dioceses and twelve co-opted members. The RCB has three business meetings during the year (in March, September and December) as well as a short formal meeting when the General Synod is in session.

RCB COMMITTEES

The committees of the RCB deal with various aspects of Church of Ireland life. These are the Executive, Allocations, Archives, Audit, Investment, Legal Advisory, Library, Property and Stipends Committees. Members of the committees are elected triennially by the members of the Representative Church Body.

RCB ACTIVITIES

The RCB's main activities involve investment management, administration of trusts and Gift Aid, payment of clergy stipends and pensions, legal services and custodial services as corporate trustee of property, legal advices and treasury management.

The RCB supports the core work of the church by providing substantial finance and support to a broad range of areas and activities including the sustentation of the clergy and pensioners, the training of clergy, episcopal ministry, education, youth, communications and running the work of the General Synod.

The RCB makes regulations on a variety of matters, always subject to state law, its duties as trustee, and subject to approval by the General Synod.

RCB OFFICES

Church of Ireland House, Rathmines, Dublin, serves as the church's administrative headquarters. The RCB employs staff to administer the activities of the RCB and other church bodies such as the General Synod and its Standing Committee, the General Synod Board of Education.

Church of Ireland House, Belfast, is home to CIYD (the Church of Ireland Youth Department), the Press Office and the Education Office (NI), also staffed by RCB employees.

RCB LIBRARY

The RCB Library is located next to the Church of Ireland Theological Institute in Churchtown, Dublin. The main functions of the library are to:

- Serve the needs of those in training for ministry in the Church of Ireland
- Assist in the continuing Christian education of clergy and laity
- Act as a reference library for those seeking information about the Church of Ireland
- Provide facilities for researching and maintaining Church archives and manuscripts

PARISH GOVERNANCE

THE GENERAL VESTRY

Every lay member of the Church of Ireland, and any member of the clergy who is not serving, who is at least 18 years old and lives within the parish boundaries, or who regularly attends the parish church, is entitled to be registered as a member of the general vestry of the parish. The registered members of the parish constitute the general vestry.

In order to become a registered member of the general vestry, a person must sign a form of declaration (found in the schedule to Chapter III of the *Constitution*). Membership may also be subject to a diocesan synod requirement to make a minimum annual contribution to church funds.

In order to vote in general vestry elections, a person must be a registered member of the general vestry. Each register of general vestry members should be updated annually and kept by the parish clergy and churchwardens.

The general vestry must meet together at least once each year at a meeting known as the Easter Vestry, which should take place within 20 days either side of Easter Day. It is at this meeting that some general vestry members are appointed to the select vestry. (Chapter III of the *Constitution* provides more detailed information.)

THE SELECT VESTRY

The select vestry is the group of individuals which takes responsibility for managing certain activities and decision-making within the parish.

The people who make up the select vestry are the member(s) of the clergy officiating in the parish who is usually the chairperson of the select vestry), the two churchwardens (known as the rector's churchwarden and the people's churchwarden), the two glebewardens (known as the rector's glebewarden and the people's glebewarden) and up to 12 additional parishioners who are registered members of the general vestry for the parish and elected to the select vestry at the Easter Vestry. (Special arrangements in respect of newly formed unions or groups of parishes are set out in Chapter III Part II of the *Constitution*.)

The rector's churchwarden and rector's glebewarden are appointed by the senior member of the clergy serving in the parish; the people's churchwarden and people's glebewarden are elected by the general vestry.

The select vestry appoints from among its members a secretary (to also act as secretary of the general vestry) and a treasurer. If the circumstances require it, a secretary and treasurer may be appointed who are not members of the select vestry (but who are members of the general vestry).

The responsibilities of the select vestry include managing the parish finances and employing any lay people, providing the infrastructure which supports worship and ministry, looking after the exterior and interior of churches, clergy residences, other parochial buildings and graveyards, and ensuring compliance with State and church legislation and regulations. The duties and responsibilities of the select vestry are detailed in the *Constitution*, and are subject to any rules or regulations imposed by a diocesan synod in respect of parish finances and organisation.

The select vestry is required to adhere to the terms of the *Constitution*, and must exercise its duties and responsibilities in line with it and any other church regulations such as those imposed by a diocesan or the General Synod. A select vestry must also comply with State law in all its activities.

The synodical structure of the Church of Ireland joins parish select vestries to the central church and its dioceses, providing support, shared expertise and a consistent approach to issues across the wider Church of Ireland.

GUIDELINES AND STATEMENTS

Guidelines and statements are produced by various bodies within the Church such as the General Synod, the Standing Committee, the House of Bishops and the Church of Ireland Press Office. These are not strictly rules or regulations, but are intended for the better management of the church.