

GENERAL SYNOD 2017

Report of the Select Committee on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief Proposer: The Very Revd John Mann

**Embargoed Against Delivery
Check Against Delivery**

Your Grace, members of Synod, in addressing you on the completion of the four years life of the Select Committee may I begin by thanking all who have contributed to its life and work during these years. There have been some changes in membership, as one would expect over that period of time, and the contribution of those who have given us assistance for short but valuable periods during the four years, to them we are also deeply indebted.

In a nutshell, our remit as a committee was to keep the Church of Ireland talking about a matter and we have certainly done a great deal of talking amongst ourselves and with other people, and I have attempted to be an impartial chair, but we sought to tread ground that we desperately needed to tread in order to live with ourselves, and more than that, to live both compassionately with, and theologically respectful of, each other. That ultimately is the point, isn't it? We hold differing theological positions from a love for and study of the same Scriptures; and this difference holds an interface with what our hearts cry out to express, as human beings, as people of faith, as those who seek to declare in every fibre of our being, what God in Christ has revealed to us through Creation and through the recreation of humanity brought about by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I cannot for one moment imagine, as we sit here at the end of a long day, that we can bring four years of talking and praying together to a simple summary in ten minutes. So let me give my subjective and heart-felt feeling at this point in time. Whilst General Synod invited its Select Committee to further discussion on any matters of concern regarding human sexuality, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the presenting issue of same sex attraction (and matters arising from this fact of human life) was where our major efforts were to lie. We have spoken in the past two or three General Synods of conversations that we have had, and the study that we have undertaken, but reducing this to the last twelve to eighteen months, what the Select Committee sought to achieve was a wider, grassroots conversation

in the parishes of the Church of Ireland, by providing study guides and encouraging meetings in the dioceses, to allow the Select Committee specifically, and thereby the Church more generally, to get a feel for how things stand on the ground now.

It is often said by those who undertake studies of the natural world, and are seeking statistical analysis of trends in wildlife, that it is as important to record what is not there as to take note of what is. So using this yardstick, it is not unfair to say that either our methods were poor, which, if that is the case, we take it on the chin; or, the appetite for talking has come to, at least in its current state, one of exhaustion. However, fact that we have an addendum to the report, and a motion to debate shortly, serve to illustrate that we are still talking and willing to engage with others who think differently, in trying to resolve how the Church of Ireland is going forward, at least for the foreseeable future – which, admittedly, may not be that far; a further step on the road of our collective pilgrimage of faith in Jesus Christ.

So we are left, as the Select Committee is wound up, with the question of how that road is to be travelled. In a way the addendum and the motion may appear to provide the two most obvious alternatives, not that they need be mutually exclusive, in fact I would ask Synod not to see them in that way. In passing, may I at this moment apologise for the fact that I inadvertently included the Honorary Secretaries in my final remarks on the inclusion of the addendum, it was, in fact, added, under some time pressure, and at my agreement.

From the dizzy heights of my outgoing role as chair of this committee I would urge General Synod to concentrate its efforts on ensuring, by what it concludes, that in seeking a resolution, it does not allow a situation or a conclusion to be reached whereby we create winners and losers. Whenever a complementary scenario is sought, that is when no one feels frozen-out, it requires, in my experience, everyone to change. It may not be a major change, almost certainly it is not a theological change, but it is an inner change that recognises that the cost of division is not just that we are divided, but that we are also diminished by setting ourselves apart from other Christians.

To solve such a conundrum requires a very careful weighing of words, and I would like to dwell for a few moments on two very relevant words: ‘integrity’ and ‘compassion’. When we think of the word ‘integrity’ we are teasing out truth that is ultimate and not just subjectively ‘in’ me; it is actual rather than relative. The dilemma, indeed paradox, of having two contrasting groups holding integrity, is what we live with. We may feel that our personal integrity is compromised by agreeing to something that is contrary to our belief, but more importantly, behind that lies what our conviction recognises as the position of Christ’s Church; what is ultimately true. When others possess a different concept, what we have

found on the Select Committee over the past four years is, that there is a stripping back and teasing out process, that both removes the incidental, and draws out the essential. It is at this point that difference is seen with the greatest clarity, and we discover exactly into what is our personal integrity anchored.

Then we take the much used word ‘compassion’. But before we allow it to embrace integrity like a wave upon a rocky shore, let us remind ourselves that we all have integrity, as we all have compassion; surely any position that we reach within our own hearts, and collectively as part of Christ’s Church, must hold both of these things as we seek to express the greatest gift of all, as St Paul declared it, namely love.

So where does this leave us having talked for four years and more? Some would say, “In an impossible position”, but I would like to claim that listening to one another and to those who have things to say to us from beyond ourselves, praying together, reading the Scriptures together and recognizing that even good disagreement is difficult, have brought us closer. Let us be alert that we treat each other’s views with extreme tenderness and care, as we would wish our own heart-felt beliefs to be heard, over a matter that remains a living reality to many people, and a matter for concern and prayer for the Church at this moment and into the future. We are a small church that exists, as does every other, to serve and to proclaim a Gospel of redemption. May those thoughts be prominent in our minds and illuminate our discussion at this time.