

GENERAL SYNOD 2017

Standing Committee Report Proposer: The Most Revd Pat Storey

**Embargoed Against Delivery
Check Against Delivery**

As I begin the task, or indeed the joy, of proposing this year's Standing Committee report, I am reminded of the comment by the writer and broadcaster Jill Tweedie. She said: "Always suspect any job men willingly vacate for women." I imagine that my illustrious eleven colleagues willingly ceded this job to this woman. For it really isn't easy to summarise a year's workings of the General Synod through Standing Committee. And that is the function of Standing Committee – to act upon the decisions of General Synod. Apart from that, it has no life of its own. That is the privilege we all inhabit of a democratic system.

However, contrary to some opinions, stuff does get done! The report is full of the workings of the many commissions and committees that operate under the remit of Standing Committee. Many aspects of church life are represented in the report and the appendices before you, some of which you will avidly read, and some of which you will skip over with the sentiment that you would rather gnaw off your left arm: we are all different and interested in different aspects of our communal life. Yet each page of this report actually does have intrinsic value, as it serves General Synod, which is you.

I would like to highlight a few things that caught my eye. I deliberately looked through the report for good news stories, possibly because nobody else will. I want to mention in particular the work of Bishops' Appeal which has always impressed me. Bishops' Appeal was originally set up to deal with world emergencies, but as we know, it has broadened into far, far more than this even though it does still support emergency appeals. To date, £131,000 and €314,000 has been raised for humanitarian aid that we offer, as Christians, to a hurting world. So thank you so much for your ongoing support for Bishops' Appeal. This year, two situations arose: firstly Hurricane Matthew in Haiti, and secondly, the ongoing and mushrooming refugee crisis, particularly from Aleppo in Syria. It is estimated that there are 4.9 million refugees from Syria alone dispersed across the globe, desperate for someone to take them. We now have Refugee Working Groups, North and South, who try to put into

practice what the governments have told us they need, and they are threefold: welcome refugees in your area, offer practical support and speak out against xenophobia. The communal ringing of church bells against xenophobia, initiated by Waterford Cathedral, was an example of trying to have a voice into our communities. Bishops' Appeal responds to these emergency situations, but also runs projects in several dioceses about which you can read for yourselves. It also, most importantly, spends time, money and energy trying to contribute to eradicating the things that keep people in poverty: mainly conflict, gender, inequality, climate change. Almost without exception, it is imbalance of power that makes poverty not yet history.

You will all be overjoyed as I come now to mention the 2016 census. Whilst we do not have the figures compiled yet as a result of the census, it actually is a crucial gauge of where we are at as a island-wide church. It is not a flawless system by any means, but it does give us an idea of where we are at – why? So that we can aim for better. The census can actually focus us on mission, which is the very kernel of Long Term Church. There will be some good news in the census, but for many of us, it will highlight the need to act and to have a vision for the future before it is too late. If we allow the census to encourage us to be missional, it will have been a worthwhile exercise. I will never forget, and I have often pondered it, when someone said to me many years ago: “A fanatic is someone who loves Jesus more than you do.”

Fanaticism is possibly not we are known for, but maybe it's time. Alternatively, we could just get together in groups and complain about it. As someone once said about Norman Vincent Peale's book: “I was asked to read *The Power of Positive Thinking* but sure, what good would that do?”

At present I am Chair of the Central Communications Board, and one of the great innovations of 2016 (although it has been in the pipeline for many years) has been our new Church of Ireland website. I want to thank Charlotte and her team who were mainly responsible for this unenviable task. I think that the result is a huge improvement and whilst not perfect and still needing adjustments, it is a much more attractive forum to showcase who we are, what we believe, and what we do. It was quite fun, actually, to quibble with other bishops about what we do believe. Now there's a sentence I never thought I'd say!

As we undertook a review process in recent months, it became clear to the review team how much communications has changed over the last decade and how difficult it is to change our trajectory. “We've always done it this way” can no longer be our theme. Digital communication, in particular, has utterly changed the way the world operates, and it is complex and time-consuming to stay on top of change. What that has done is to put pressure

on our resources and it is clear that our communications staff are under-staffed and under-resourced. Janet, Paul and Peter deserve our thanks. Our diocesan communications officers, some of whom are volunteers, are vital in this process too as they help to disseminate necessary information.

The Parish Development Working Group, formerly known as Church 21, continues to offer mutual encouragement and support to parishes around the island. The recently held annual conference was useful for the sharing of ideas, honest reflection and fellowship. I know that my own early experience of Church 21 helped me to do two things and they were related: to build a team, and to no longer feel as alone.

In conclusion, lots of clergy and volunteers make each of these commissions and committees happen, and I know I speak on behalf of all of Standing Committee and the House of Bishops in saying thank you to all of you, as you turn our faith into action. There is plenty of bad news around, and sometimes it can be psychologically very depressing. The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is the way you use them. I know that traditionally the Standing Committee report wouldn't have been perceived as that herald of great news, but it is. Without all the activity held within this report, we would be much the poorer. You make stuff happen. Thank you.