

Representative Church Body Report
Seconder: Bishop Andrew Forster
Embargo until Delivery · Check against Delivery

I don't know how many of you saw this but last week, Oxford Languages – the publishers of the Oxford English Dictionary – estimated that use of the word 'pandemic' increased by more than 57,000% this year.

Such has been the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on our lives that the publishers abandoned their usual quest for a 'Word of the Year' for 2020 and opted instead for a series of what they called "words of an unprecedented year".

You could probably guess most of them: Covid-19, coronavirus, lockdown, circuit-breaker, support bubble, keyworker, furlough. I even read that there had been a massive increase in the use of the word 'unprecedented' – to which I, myself, must plead guilty.

However, 'unprecedented' is certainly what 2020 has been – or, at least, unprecedented in living memory. The coronavirus has left its mark on our language and its mark on our lives. But words don't convey the full story. In this case, numbers tell us far more than words.

In 1972 – the worst year of the Troubles – almost 500 people lost their lives to violence (an almost unimaginable death toll). But already this year, there have been twice as many deaths – around 1,000 – from coronavirus in Northern Ireland, and another 2,000 in the Republic of Ireland.

Think about that: three thousand lives lost on this small island. Hundreds and hundreds of families left to bear their grief virtually alone, or in unreal and very difficult circumstances.

2020 has certainly been unprecedented. And 2019 seems like a distant memory.

2019 was a great year. In 2019, the RCB built on the strong foundations it had laid for supporting parishes and dioceses. It busied itself making new resources available on the 'Parish Resources' section of the Church of Ireland website to deliver training and develop expertise. There was a particular focus, on the development of safeguarding policy, further development of data protection policy, there was training, and, in the meantime, the RCB Library offered online presentations, lectures and exhibitions of interest beyond our church. So, looking back,

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2019 was a time of unprecedented activity for the RCB.

2019 was also a year of significant change for our Church. It was to be the last year in which Archbishop Richard Clarke would chair the RB. With your permission, chair, I would like to acknowledge with deep gratitude his leadership, guidance and friendship during my years of ministry.

There were staff changes, too, with the retirement of Trevor Stacey after many years of faithful service as Head of Property & Trusts; and there were appointments in safeguarding, property and legal – all aimed at extending the services offered by the RCB.

Things were going swimmingly. We were looking forward to the General Synod in Croke Park – but then suddenly, in March, Covid happened.

There's no hiding the fact that these are difficult days, and we wouldn't be human if we didn't become dismayed at times. After all, where are we to find grounds for hope in this pandemic?

Well, towards the beginning of lockdown, the Irish Times published a letter entitled 'Something to look forward to'. The letter read:

“Sir, – My grandson rang to see how I was getting on with being cocooned. To cheer me up, he said, ‘Think of the lovely butterfly you will be when the cocooning time is over.’ What a picture of colour and freedom and joy. It is something that is worth waiting for. – Yours, etc.
Monica Gray, Cabinteely, Dublin 18.”

For many of you, it might be hard to see ‘a picture of colour and freedom and joy’, as we travel through our new reality of a world struggling to contain Covid – yearning for the day when we can meet together, encourage each other and worship together in the way that we love.

And yet ... and yet ...

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Think of how the RCB adjusted to its new circumstances this year – committee meetings moving online; staff working from home; staff working with bishops to prepare the ‘In-Church Worship’ protocols which were issued on Parish Resources; developing guidance in relation to managing property during Covid; guidance in relation to parish finances; and offering loans to cathedrals that had suffered a significant loss of tourist income. The provision of information and financial support was consistent with what we expect from the RCB, as it lives its mission, as noted in the Book of Reports, “to inform, to support and to manage resources for the advancement of the mission and ministry of the Church of Ireland.”

The RCB may be doing things differently, but its mission remains the same. And we are enormously grateful to its committees and staff – our key workers – for helping us through these difficult times.

Think of the way our clergy and parishioners responded to the pandemic with large numbers attending church online; parishes offering drive-in services; and clergy reaching out to maintain community and fellowship. Some things may be changing, but some things never change. We have been innovating to serve, and yet we hold onto that which is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

The gospel that we preach is being preached over new media and hopefully to new listeners. But the message remains the same, the message of hope in the person and promises of Jesus. I keep reminding people in Derry and Raphoe that we are people of faith, not fear. There are grounds for hope. The RCB and its staff are evidence of that. Our clergy, our select vestries and our parishioners are evidence of that.

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God.” (Isaiah 41:10)

It is my pleasure to second the report of the Representative Church Body.