

Standing Committee Report

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Your Grace, I have much pleasure in proposing the Report of the Standing Committee which can be found on page 165 of the Book of Reports.

A few years ago, in those pre-Covid days when visiting family in the US was easy, I spent a short stay in Philadelphia. While there I visited the site of the President's House. Between 1790 and 1800 Philadelphia was the new nation's capital and a house there served as the executive mansion to Presidents George Washington and John Adams, before the White House was built, and the capital moved to Washington DC. While the house no longer exists, information boards describe it and its occupants. What I found particularly interesting was that the members of George Washington's household included nine African slaves. They were named and described. Two of them (Hercules and Ona Judge) escaped George Washington's ownership to gain their freedom. It is a reminder that there are figures in history who are rightly revered for their contribution in one sphere, who at the same time saw nothing wrong in acting in ways which we today would find totally unacceptable. They lived in a different world.

Turning to page 208 of your book of reports, you will see that Appendix 1 of the Church and Society Commission Report (CASC) the statement on racism and injustice which states that 'hidden history lies behind statues and monuments, some of which are in churches'. I'm sure we can all think of elaborate memorials, constructed to extol the virtues of the great, good and wealthy in past generations. However today we might recognise that, for some of these people, their fortune or status was in part built upon the contribution or indeed the suffering of many other unnamed individuals. We can't change history, though it is constantly being re-written as fresh evidence, increased awareness and changed context provide new perspectives. We would not want to pull down the Georgian mansions of the aristocracy, but where the wealth to fund these impressive buildings was derived from slavery on sugar plantations, or child labour down coal pits, the tour guide literature and audio-visual presentations can become powerful vehicles for education about such a chequered past. In the same way, where these memorials exist in our churches, they should be used to highlight the issues of slavery, exploitation and injustice and our Christian response to this continuing problem in the world today.

As Christians we believe that life is precious, and we are called to recognise God in the face of the other. Sadly, this report also acknowledges that the scourge of racism is still with us. That is why it is good to note the Act of Solidarity and prayer resources that accompany this report from CASC. I hope you have read them and maybe even used them in worship. The excellent response by CASC to the Committee on Justice in Dáil Eireann on the proposed Dying with Dignity Bill 2020 starting on page 213 of the Book of Reports, also merits careful reading.

While on the theme of ‘hidden history’ I want to draw your attention to page 180 of the Standing Committee Report and the existence of a ‘Working Group Concerning a Co-ordinated Response by the Church to Historic Institutional Abuse’. This is perhaps hidden history a little closer to home. In recent years we have all been horrified by the results of historic inquiries and archaeological surveys on properties run as institutional care settings. When these mother and baby homes, orphanages and industrial schools were filled with children and very vulnerable young mothers who were still children themselves, the attitude to birth outside marriage was very different to that which pertains today. Of course, we should not also lose sight of the fact that there were those who had positive experiences from their time in such institutions and that there were many good, caring and professional staff in such places. But for those not so fortunate, the fact that their names are coming into the public domain with their permission, that their personal stories are being heard and what was hidden before is now being brought into the light, is to be welcomed. It is the only way that some form of healing process can begin for the victims.

While the vast majority of these institutions were not in any way connected to the Church of Ireland, a small number had links to the churches of the Reformed tradition. These were meaningful links and were expressed in a variety of ways. Well intentioned members of the Church of Ireland sat on boards or committees which oversaw the running of such facilities, clergy and sometimes bishops were invited to chair annual general meetings or were asked to encourage financial support for the work of caring for orphans and young mothers in institutions with a Protestant ethos and clientele. In return these institutions were relied upon by clergy and other individuals. While the RCB or any individual Church of Ireland Diocese did not run a mother and baby home, orphanage or industrial school, the informal and well-intentioned connections of past generations are there for good and for ill. It is something we must acknowledge. In this modern media age, when journalists, politicians and, much more importantly the victims, demand considered responses quickly, it is good to have such a

working group in place to address questions promptly, and with the care and attention they deserve. We thank them for their commitment to this important work.

On a lighter note, as someone who sits on the Priorities Fund Committee, it is good to note that the grant of €10,000 issued to each diocese by the RCB and the Priorities Fund in the early months of the Covid pandemic, is mentioned in the report of the Central Communications Board on page 198. As someone, who like many other clergy spent months facing a camera in otherwise empty churches, I know I, and my parish, valued this financial support. We were also grateful for the help and advice provided by Church House and others, in relation to the production of online worship. While we all welcomed the reopening of church buildings, and with it the possibility of moving from being viewers online to the more participative aspects of 'in person' worship, the creativity and ingenuity of clergy, readers, musicians, singers, amateur technicians, camera operators and others, to produce high quality worship online from their own parishes Sunday by Sunday, was very impressive. The diversity of worship styles across the Church of Ireland was there for all to see and it attracted a viewing audience from both home and abroad. This ministry continues in a number of parishes and is valued.

Of course, communications and broadcasting happen at a professional level too and the Central Communications Board is very much at the interface between the Church of Ireland and the national and local media. At a time when the role and financing of public service broadcasting is under scrutiny, it is good to see that both RTÉ and BBC Northern Ireland rose to the challenge of the pandemic and provided a steady stream of worship services and other religious material at a time when many people were experiencing anxiety and loneliness. Such broadcasts on the national airwaves, and not limited to niche religious channels, is vital to the witness of the Church and is a positive contribution to the spiritual health of wider society. It should not be taken for granted and we salute all that this committee does in this vital area. When it comes to internal church print media, we note the appointment of Emma Blain as editor of the *Church of Ireland Gazette* and wish her well in her new role.

There is so much more I could have touched on in this proposing speech. Despite the many ongoing challenges we face, we have much to be thankful for, and a steady stream of work done, as the people of God in this place and at this time. I have much pleasure in proposing this Standing Committee Report.