

General Synod 2022

Bill No.1

Proposer: Mr Ken Gibson

Check Against Delivery · Embargo Until Delivery

Archbishop,

The first thing I am going to say may surprise some people who may not agree with me. I hope when I explain why I hold this view, they will at least understand where I am coming from.

My first point is that we need to thank God for the Irish Government. There I have said it – are members surprised? I would add to that thank God for the flexibility shown by the Croke Park Conference Centre and the Armagh City Hotel – I will say a bit more about that in a minute or two.

Cast your mind back two years and reflect on the concerns, uncertainty, worries and confusion that existed in society as a whole and particularly in our Church given our two political jurisdictions with different timing and nature of restrictions being imposed, lifted and reimposed as the pandemic developed.

Were we opening, closing, worrying about church activities as well as Sunday worship? How did we stand regarding Easter General Vestry meetings, Diocesan Synods, and General Synod when gatherings were banned and we did not want meet anyway because of concerns, rightly, for our own health and that of others. All this against a backdrop of us needing to conduct business at parish and diocese, and on an all-island basis.

So many of us just thought we could do that business online – how wrong we were when we started to look more closely. The legal framework the Church of Ireland works under puts an obligation on us to comply with our Constitution. Were we to conduct business outwith the terms of that Constitution, any decisions reached would be null and void.

As the papers show, the Constitution is very clear – Chapter 1 Section 14 in relation to General Synod clearly says “ordinary meeting ... in every year ... at such time and **place**”. In relation to Diocesan Synods, Chapter 2 Section 21 states “each year at such time and **place**”. Finally, Chapter 3 Section 11 tells us that General Vestry meetings are publicised with the notice giving the “**place** and hour”.

So, constitutionally each of these three activities must happen in a **place**. In summary, legally these things must happen but legally the Covid restrictions meant we couldn't meet. So we were between a rock and a hard place. This is where the Irish Government came to our rescue by passing temporary legislation that allowed many bodies constituted in the way we are to set aside the normal requirements and meet online, ensuring that the business so transacted was legal. That is why, in 2020 we were able to meet online but very late in the year.

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Last year we had hoped that things were on the up and we could meet normally but that proved not to be the case so we met again online in the autumn. However, that temporary legislation expired last November and despite lobbying, including by some of those with us today, the Irish Government did not renew it, I suppose as part of its “normality” plan.

Earlier I mentioned Croke Park and Armagh. We had bookings in those venues for the last couple of years and both were extremely helpful in deferring those bookings with no financial penalty.

Now briefly to the Bill. It has two purposes.

Firstly as a safeguard should we be hit by a new wave of Covid or indeed by any such disaster (and we pray that we won't) in the future we will no longer be held to ransom by that word **place**.

Secondly it will give flexibility in this Synod, in the diocese, and in parishes to make use of technology where appropriate in how they do their business.

So, for example, a diocesan synod might divide into several groups and meet in different places for part of the business, coming together for further discussion. Also geographically dispersed dioceses may have little business to transact in a particular year and decide to go online. My colleague may say a bit more about that flexibility.