

## **General Synod 2022**

### **Church of Ireland Youth Department Report**

**Seconder: Bishop Pat Storey**

**Check Against Delivery · Embargo Until Delivery**

The challenges of a pandemic for any face-to-face work are pretty obvious; and of course the Church of Ireland Youth Department was just as affected as anyone else. Parish youth workers and diocesan youth officers' jobs almost ceased to exist in the first lockdown as we all tried to navigate the new perils of 'working by zoom'. It proved extremely difficult – young people were spending their whole day online with school or uni lessons, and the last thing they wanted was more time online in the evenings.

There were Safeguarding challenges too – was it ok for a parish youth worker to zoom a member of their youth group? Did parents need to be nearby? How did you hold a zoom for a group of young people under 18 and ensure that you kept all safeguarding requirements and guidelines? It was a bit of a nightmare for anyone working professionally in youth work.

However, most Church of Ireland parochial and diocesan youth staff knuckled down and were incredibly inventive in how they managed their responsibilities – they learnt new skills, embraced new possibilities, and, on the plus side, realised they could wear their jammies all day and nobody would know! Engagement with the young people in their care became entirely virtual, and it was a long time before youth groups would meet again. I want to say a huge thank you to all who worked so hard to keep the youth train going. Firstly, our national staff: Simon, Steve and Barbara, born extroverts, who had to sit behind a computer screen and work out how they were going to do this. They were responsible for motivating everyone else, and they were just brilliant. Secondly, every salaried diocesan youth officer, parish youth worker, and volunteer did their utmost to protect, pastor, and provide for the needs of the young people in their charge. They were genuinely awesome!

However, all of this took its toll on those left in charge. There were times when staff were discouraged and frustrated – their very professional existence was predicated upon meeting with people. It was debilitating, exhausting, and very demanding. Like many clergy who found themselves locked in a new way of doing things, and an unwelcome one at that, it was at times very hard on the mental health of all those who were virtually caring for others. We have all needed time, re-calibration, and re-invigorating, to personally step up to the mark post pandemic, and plan to once again deliver excellent youth work.

I can only say how much I admire and thank each and every one of you. You have paid the price of leadership, and I truly believe that we can now see new, hopeful things happen, as we rise to the challenge of the post pandemic world of church. It looks different. It will be demanding and it's

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unknown territory, but in God's strength, we will do it, and young people can once again be resourced, pastored, trained, and ultimately, led to deepen their faith in a God who promises that He will never let us down. We don't know what the future for the church, and for our young people, is – but that is not our vocation, and I keep having to remind myself of this. Our vocation, those of us who are involved in the lives of our Church of Ireland young people, is to lead them to 'the Rock that is Higher than I'. That's pretty much it.

Like many others here, I have witnessed during the post pandemic surge of Confirmation services, hundreds of young people declare that they are owning Christian faith for themselves, and this, managed well, is a remarkable sign of hope. But we cannot rest on our laurels, and we cannot do it alone. We all feel slightly overwhelmed by what has happened to us in the past two years – but one thing is sure. When we look with trepidation or anxiety to the future of the church and its young people, we do what we have always done – pray hard, work hard, and keep the faith. As the response of our young people at the Confirmation service continuously declares in genuine hopefulness, 'we will, by God's help'.

Thank you and I am delighted to second the CIYD report.