

Commission on Ministry – Report 2011

COMMISSION ON MINISTRY

REPORT 2011

1. Membership

House of Bishops

The Rt Rev Kenneth Good, Bishop of Derry and Raphoe (Chairman)

Standing Committee

General Synod – clerical

Ven Gary Hastings

Pensions Board

Rev Edward Woods

General Synod – lay

Ms Ruth Handy
Mr Andrew McNeile

Representative Church Body

Mrs Lorna Gleasure

Director of the Theological Institute

Rev Dr Maurice Elliott

Honorary Secretaries

Mr Samuel Harper

Co-opted

Mr Greg Fromholz

Director of Ordinands

Very Rev Katharine Poulton

2. Terms of Reference

The Commission on Ministry was established by the General Synod in 1996. In accordance with its terms of reference, the Commission makes recommendations concerning the Christian ministry, both lay and ordained. This includes the deployment of stipendiary and non-stipendiary clergy appropriate to the requirements of the Church of Ireland in the future. Matters relating to ministry may be referred to the Commission by the archbishops and bishops, the Standing Committee and the Representative Church Body.

3. Summary

The Commission on Ministry concentrated on the following issues:

- Ministry in the West of Ireland
- Retirement Planning for Clergy
- Mid-career Programme for Clergy

4. Purpose

To reflect on and propose changes to ministry training, deployment and support as will assist the Church to achieve its mission and sustain and nurture the clergy already in the Church's care throughout their lifetime.

5. Aims for 2011 to May 2012

The Commission on Ministry aims:

- a) to continue to provide pre-retirement courses for clergy;
- b) to examine ministry development;
- c) to examine best practice for diocesan and parish missional structures;
- d) to assist in furthering the development of missional ministry in the West of Ireland;
- e) to structure and provide mid-career opportunities for clergy;
- f) to collaborate with other Church of Ireland committees where areas of work may coincide.

6. Missional Ministry in the West of Ireland

The Very Rev Sue Patterson produced a large body of work on missional ministry in the west of Ireland that was appended to the Commission on Ministry's report to General Synod in 2009.

Further to this work a meeting was held in Magee House, Sligo, in May 2009 with representatives of the dioceses in the west of Ireland. It was agreed that work needed to begin in local areas bringing together clergy and laypeople to discuss the issues surrounding ministry in the west of Ireland.

The Commission on Ministry applied for funds in the 2010 budget to the Standing Committee to financially support this initiative.

During 2010, the Commission on Ministry was informed that work in this area had faltered due to an uncertain response to it from some quarters. The Commission on Ministry recognised that there may be a broader crisis within the Church of Ireland and felt that this should be explored and quantified with greater clarity before any other work is undertaken.

The Commission on Ministry requested that the Ven Gary Hastings produce a paper on this issue and it is included as Appendix A on page 402.

In January 2011, the Commission on Ministry appointed a sub-group to examine the issue of how ministry in the west of Ireland may be brought forward. The sub-group informed the Commission on Ministry at its meeting in March 2011 that thought had been given as to how the findings of the papers written by the Very Rev Sue Patterson and the Ven Gary Hastings could best be advanced. The Commission agreed that the

Commission on Ministry – Report 2011

strength of Ven Gary Hastings' paper could be reinforced by the gathering of objective data and statistics.

It was noted that the Council for Mission, in recent years, had sought the permission of the Standing Committee to proceed with a project for collecting statistical information and it was agreed that the Rt Rev Kenneth Good as Chairman of the Commission on Ministry would contact the Chairman of the Council for Mission to ascertain if it was still the Council for Mission's wish for this research to be carried out and, if so, the Commission on Ministry wished to support and work with the Council for Mission in this task. It was agreed that if the joint project were to proceed the Commission would inform the archbishops and bishops at the relevant time.

7. Mid-Vocation Programme for Clergy

In 2010, the Commission on Ministry appointed a working group, chaired by the then Bishop of Tuam, to design and run a mid-vocation programme for clergy. The group met several times and ran an overnight workshop in the Church of Ireland Theological Institute in January 2011 as a pilot programme. It was well received by the clergy who participated in it and it is hoped to repeat the experiment, with some amendments, in early 2012. The group is also compiling a list of resources useful to people at this stage in their ministry.

8. Retirement Planning for Clergy

The Commission has continued with pre-retirement courses for clergy. One was run in Armagh in the spring of 2010 and another one is scheduled for Dublin in May, 2011.

APPENDIX A

The Future of the Church of Ireland.

The public face of the Church of Ireland today still bears a strong resemblance to the public face it had in the 1950's and 60's, if the Irish Times, Diocesan magazines and the Gazette are anything to go by. It looks, sounds and smells much the same. Charity drives for one good cause or another, mission in Africa and the Third World, Bishops, Archdeacons and clergy, choirs and history, tea and buns; schools and church roofs and halls to be built or kept up. Elderly churchwardens, organists and choirmasters, someone doing something somewhere with 'Youth'. It's still much the same institution most of us were baptised and confirmed in. On the surface.

We are living at a time of cultural flux which is increasingly affecting our church. Religion has been marginalised from mainstream culture. It is no longer obligatory to be a Christian, or a Christian of a particular denomination, in order to be a member of society. This cultural change has induced a widespread trend of apathy towards religion on the one hand, and a swing to the right on the other. Though there is a vocal, minority, anti-faith, 'scientist' movement with strong media support, [Dawkins et al.] a majority of the population still say they 'believe in God' and are 'spiritual', though not in any structured or visible way. (In that at least they may differ little from some of our own parishioners!) Other faiths now present in society, Islam amongst the largest of them, are mostly ethnically based, and not usually perceived as an alternative. The European institutional churches —Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran, etc. — are the product of long political and historical processes, including the Reformation, but they now find themselves in an entirely new context. This is comparable to the state of religious affairs in North America, where churches and faiths are in a 'commercial' context where every religious grouping has an equal place in a competitive market, and is obliged to sell itself and its beliefs as best it can. Not what we are used to, with our hereditary, tribal, ethno-political population bases.

The result of all this in the Church of Ireland so far is that numbers in our churches are going down, North and South, and young people are no longer attending. This is also the case for other denominations, especially the institutional churches, both here in W. Europe and North America. The speed of this decline varies from country to country depending on local situations, history and culture. We are still relatively high up the 'slippery slope'. A sample of attendance figures across Ireland over the last 10 years would tell us how steep that slope is in our case, and where the line of decline is theoretically going to hit the metaphorical X axis, the 'vanishing point', — The End of the Church of Ireland As We Know It. [To be melodramatic about it.]

For sure, in 20 years time, or possibly before that, many small rural churches will either have gone, or be on their last legs, and not just in the scattered West of Ireland. A large proportion

Commission on Ministry – Report 2011

at the minute have an elderly or at least later middle aged population, and the gap between the very young,(under 12 or Confirmation age) and the next age group above them is widening constantly. In many churches the youngest members apart from young children may be in their early 40's. Young people, having departed after confirmation, (if they were there at all,) no longer return later in life with their own children as was once the case. A cord has been cut, the tradition of osmotically passing on the faith, combined with weekly church attendance, is past. As a result the 'vanishing point' for very many of these small communities is no longer over the visible horizon, it will arrive within our lifetimes.

Urban churches are a more mixed bag, and it is more difficult to generalise amongst them. Some of these have specialised in their worship style or approach and have drawn congregations from outside parish geography and hereditary groupings, and may have a greater chance of survival, but others are as doomed as any small rural parish.

The North of Ireland with its larger numbers may seem healthier than the Republic, but the same process of decline seems inevitable there too. Since the end of the Troubles in the North, the religious markers which delineate tribe and belonging even in the most superficial and facile way will increasingly wither away, and any support this gives to either church attendance or nominal affiliation will also atrophy. The cultural ties and obligations of church membership in the South of Ireland are also greatly weakened by societal changes there.

Metaphors of cancer and the Titanic may be too dramatic, it's more a matter of slow, quiet, respectable deflation, a gentle haemorrhaging allowing us to drift off to sleep in the damp but hallowed halls of elder glory. If it is a crisis, it is a crisis in slow motion. Yet things are going to change and we should prepare for that change. There is time, but we should look at trends and plan ahead where we can.

There are two sides to this (at least). At the level of management, — staffing, finance, pensions, income, the grouping and structuring of parishes and dioceses, we must be proactive in as far as we can. On the religious side of things it will be more complicated. To prophesy for a moment: —some will wish to continue to be what they are, the way they always were and fair play to them, and they must be looked after, clergy and laity. Others will, as trends elsewhere have shown, tend to pull sharply to the right, to a more narrowly defined and exclusive theology. It is to be hoped that the majority will keep its collective head and attempt to achieve a living, breathing, flexible institution, (or perhaps loose confederation of smaller groups,) which will, all being well, continue to be broad minded, broad based, inclusive, outward looking, and happy to engage with the culture round them constructively and to vocalise the gospel in a stimulating and relevant way. Reformation divisions will fade into insignificance, and the older, reactionary churches which came out of that Reformation period, ourselves and our 39 Articles amongst them, will find themselves in new reactionary positions as Christianity (re-)polarises round contemporary issues, most likely liberal versus conservative.

Commission on Ministry – Report 2011

This is the time to do some crystal ball gazing, gather a bit of information, and see where the boat is going, how fast [or whether] it's going down and what sort of lifeboats we may need to design. Merely harvesting figures is not enough, detailed analysis will be necessary with a view to informing policy. (For example, cf *Quo Vadimus*, 1998 & *The Challenge of*