

GENERAL SYNOD 2011

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON MINISTRY

Proposed by the Venerable Gary Hastings, Diocese of Tuam

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Grace, Members of Synod, I'm from Tuam Diocese, but this is not about Tuam. Nor about the West, or the South. I'm speaking here about the whole Church of Ireland, in the context of Western Europe.

The Commission on Ministry has been given pause for thought regarding the long term future of the Church of Ireland and not just in terms of ministry. We are living in a time of great cultural change, and some of the symptoms are already visible within our own church. The age profile, the overall numbers attending, the attitudes of people to personal spirituality, in that many no longer practice their faith in any structured way outside Sunday services, if they still attend at all. The stance of our society to faith in general is changing, clearly visible in the media. The influences behind these changes are choice, and the lack of cultural, political or group pressure to conform to any past norms.

I think we need to recognise this openly amongst ourselves; people seem to be aware of it, though I'm not hearing it publicly and constructively discussed. But perhaps we need first to confirm the anecdotal opinions of this report in a more concrete form. This would require some kind of survey in our church to check on the rate of change of attendance, and perhaps of belief, opinion or practice. Though that would be a matter to be decided elsewhere. Some analysis of any figures found will be necessary as well. Any results will have far reaching policy ramifications for our church in the next couple of decades and beyond. The

Commission on Ministry believes that any resulting conversation should involve more than just themselves, which is why the paper is appended to the Commission report. This is something all sides and facets of the Church need to cogitate upon and begin to consider addressing.

This is not a disease of our own institution, it is affecting all churches in the Western hemisphere in different ways. It is a cultural phenomenon, not any inherent flaw or fault in ourselves. It will require deeper thought than a knee-jerk reaction or metaphorical call to arms. It will need conversation and discussion with all the patience, farsightedness and wisdom we can muster and result in change at levels deeper than liturgy and robes and hymnbooks.

There is no Answer to the problem, with a capital A. There is no one thing we can do, however big, that will turn the boat around, this will require many answers and many changes. An outburst of evangelical zeal, or a wave of deep Catholic piety might have been expected once upon a time, but this period in the world's history will require new and creative responses; the traditional, historical reactions will no longer suffice. One of the first things that springs to many minds is Youth, but young people are neither the magic answer nor a problem to be fixed. They must be a part and a source of whatever changes and responses we come up with, but there is no one, magic answer. There will be many answers, and each of us has the potential to be one of them. We are in a complex, tangled, cultural situation and it will take more than one approach or style of approach to be successful.

My weak attempts at prophecy in this report may be spurious. I don't know what's going to happen next, but trends I perceive through my own reading and experience and from talking to clergy countrywide, in our church and other denominations, lead me to believe that some of what I say here is probable. There can be no return to a 'Holy Catholic Ireland', or a 'Christian British Empire', or medieval 'Christendom', concepts which shaped religious identity in this country. Now choice exists; Christianity in Europe is no longer absolute. It must take its place

amongst and alongside other faiths, in peaceful competition with both them, atheism and apathy. There will always be religious faith, and there will always be Christianity. It may not be the kind of Christianity that any of us would like, but it will be there.

In a way there is no problem facing us, there are just changes, changes that we must adjust to, and address, and cope with, and be creative in response to. Or else changes we initiate ourselves. This cultural change affects not just us, but all Christians, and indeed all people of faith, whatever that faith might be. There is still time. Our church is still functioning, still buoyant, still viable and healthy, and there are smart people amongst us, people of deep faith and wisdom, and similar people in other Christian denominations. We must talk and work together for the future of the gospel in our society.