

**GENERAL SYNOD 2011**

**STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT**

**Proposed by Mr Andrew McNeile, Diocese of Dublin & Glendalough**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Your Grace, it is a great honour and privilege to present this substantial report of Standing Committee to the Church of Ireland Gen Synod 2011; coming as I do, as a charismatic, from a church tradition or ecclesiological stream that in chocolate bar terms is often considered the fruit and nut section it is a particular joy. But that in itself perhaps points to the breadth and inclusiveness of our church. Now if the primate can be quoting Bob Dylan songs of the 60s at the Tuam electoral college perhaps I can wind it forwards a couple of decades to the song titles of the all girl band Bananarama "it ain't what you do it's the way that you do it".

What has struck me over the last few years in Standing Committee is the change in the way we do business together. Although we still have to face the realities of very differing church traditions and emphases, there has been a major growth in personal relationships across some of the more obvious divides, which has led to a change in the way contentious issues such as human sexuality are debated. There seems to me an increasing politeness and respect and a care in how things are said out of a desire to maintain relationship. This development is to me a source of joy and encouragement and to that end when reflecting on the Hard Gospel Implementation Group's report I do hope members will consider carefully the comments on page 227 in conjunction with item (c) on page 237, which indeed concerns the area of human sexuality, as that was the full result of just such a discussion. Such cross-party relationship and care for the views of others

will, I hope and pray, manifest itself and develop not only in the General Synod but throughout the church. If we can hold our own internal churchmanship tensions in a kingdom atmosphere where primacy of relationship prevails then not only are we echoing the very clear John 17:21 call of Jesus but also positioning ourselves to be a place that perhaps might facilitate connection and relationship of the many different Christian expressions on the island – a role to which a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church was kind enough to suggest we, the Church of Ireland, are called.

The scope and scale of Standing Committee's work is very evident in the hundred pages that are before you. 15 minutes only permits me to touch on a few key areas of the report, and my seconder will, I hope, fill in some of the gaps

One of the annual highlights of Standing Committee is the presentation of the Priorities Report. It is always an encouraging demonstration of how God is at work throughout the length and breadth of the Church of Ireland. A full list of the projects can be seen on pages 228 to 232 and show a church committed to serve and minister in a wide variety of creative and fresh ways and we are fortunate to have such a dedicated and professional team who oversee this allocation. However a list at such a gathering is a rather bland affair and so I would like to propose Your Grace, that space be created for the priorities fund to identify two or three projects to make presentations at Gen Synod for 5 min each so that life might be brought to this. Alf McCreary of the Belfast Telegraph at the January Drogheda Ecumenical Conference was challenging us to make events like this more faith fulfilling and missionally focused (actually your Grace he was a bit blunter than that) but it seemed a fair point to make and perhaps heeding the call and taking a step in that direction would be no bad thing.

Leading on from that let me turn to the report of the central communications board.

Where the Bishop of Cork leads the Church of Ireland follows. Twitter and

Facebook have been recent additions to the church of Ireland's communications portfolio and I think the CCB and head of communications have conducted a very professional and effective rollout. I'm also thrilled to see the CCB thinking about how to develop more of the church witness on the website (perhaps this could even be extended to our whole communications strategy) comments by various key media commentators suggest there is an openness even the desire for a new kind of relationship. At various church organised events inviting input from journalists about the role of the church in society, I have been struck by their affirmation of, even desire for, the presence of the church's voice in the public square. At the aforementioned event Patsy McGarry said the key role for the church was to bring hope to the nation, Alf McCreary in terms of both call and challenge spoke of the verse in Revelation "behold I make all things new". Fintan O'Toole's recent contribution at the Irish Council of churches suggested five very spiritual themes as ways in which the church could engage in the public square. Each of these folk also had some tough things to say to us, and I think our ability to develop a new connection and relationship will depend upon our willingness to hear these things without being defensive.

However, before I elevate journalists to prophetic sainthood, I'm also conscious that they are men and women, with papers to sell and editors to satisfy and the need for powerful stories—but that's what the church has – powerful life transformation stories.

Making the connections to these stories, unearthing these treasures, will be a challenge both for the CCB and the journalists and will require a changed approach. It is therefore very encouraging to see the efforts being made both in the report and at a recent internal conference to connect to the margins where these stories are to be found.

The pressure for change is upon us. This is reflected in many areas of the report, changes in attitudes, legislation, economics and to our finances, both personal and corporate and the kind of missional reality changes discussed elsewhere.

The trouble with change is mostly we think it's a brilliant idea as long as other people are doing the changing—not my diocese, my parish or me.

I have known personally the joy of seeing great glories in one's church and the acute pain of their passing. So I can fully understand the temptation and desire, that comes to most of us, to hanker after past glories, and the way we try and cling onto them, making preservation of our current culture and traditions the great good even whilst present realities are knocking on our door reminding us firmly that those days are past. But as Juergen Moltmann in his book - "the Theology of Hope" puts it so eloquently "Christian hope cannot cling rigidly to the past, and the given, and ally itself with the utopia of the status quo".

"What got us here, won't get us there". The title of a recent book I picked up—seems in many ways an appropriate motto for us. The first thing it highlighted to me was the need for me to change—a development my wife and children are thrilled about—as they are able to make a number of suggestions on that front. Change has to begin with me, my parish, my diocese.

The ministry training project sought to address many areas of the changes affecting the presbyterate and the diaconate. At a recent Standing Committee meeting it was felt that the time has now come for us to consider carefully how the changes around us affect the provision of Episcopal ministry. The special Synod highlighted a willingness for change and a desire for review. Standing committee has now set up a working group that will try to scope out the areas to be considered and how the select committee can be structured in a way that it can conduct a successful review. The proposals for how this committee will be established and how this review will be done so that change can be brought about will be brought to next year's Gen Synod

On pages 223 and pages 261–273, the Child Protection Officer review, Republic of Ireland follows on from last years review of the Northern Ireland Role. It highlights the importance of the CPO as a resource to Bishops and Dioceses

providing advice and guidance in respect of Safeguarding Trust.

Adjustments have been made to the role of the CPO RI including the incorporation of some Garda vetting work into the role. The two Child Protection Officers are currently working to develop protocols for the risk assessment of offenders in church and are also developing expertise in respect of safeguarding vulnerable adults. All of this speaks of a great degree of professionalism care and focus being brought to this vital area. I am sure you would all want to join me in appreciating the work done by Ms Margaret Yarr and Ms Renee English and offer them every encouragement as they engage in a new phase of development supporting ministry across the Church.

The parish development working group's report is on page 288 and this gives very clear information about how the program works. However what I found most instructive are anecdotal reports from parishes who have benefited from the programme. I hope we will hear from members during the debate who have participated it.

I'm also looking forward to an energetic debate on the work of Bishops appeal. The full report of which can be found on pages 241 to 247. To see the significant growth in income and distribution of it reflects a very healthy outworking of a Kingdom theology of money, namely that of giving more generously to those in need when under pressure ourselves. The dedication and excellence of this team and the committed service of Martin O'Connor are evident to all. This is one of the excellent areas in the report that keeps us outwards focused and puts our own difficulties into a helpful perspective. My thanks to all who serve so well in this area.

On the subject of thanks I have had some view of the considerable effort and work involved in being an Honorary Secretary of the General Synod and would like to thank them all for their willing service and extensive hard work. Equally I

want to recognize and thank the RB Synod Services team who face the pressures of increased demand and constrained resources, always ensuring it runs so professionally.

And I also want to thank the RB that we have now made the transition to Christian names throughout the Book of Reports. It is a joy to see a much requested change being implemented especially one that makes us feel a bit more like family.

You may feel in my presentation that I've drifted too far from the set items in the report, but it often seems to me the tyranny of what is before us can dissipate our passions for the heart and spirit of our mission, which is the very centre of our calling, focusing us inwards on the present rather than leading us outwards and creatively reimagining the future, or as the Archbishop of Dublin said at his enthronement service “ to bring the tradition forward to new place, to make of it a fresh expression of God’s presence and God’s power”.

And creative rethinking and refocusing of the agendas of committees and synods will need to be done if they are to be instruments that are to contribute to us passing on our inherited faith to the rising generation.

Alf McCreary, as I mentioned earlier, touched a nerve for me when he questioned the faith-enhancing nature of events such as these. But the potential for it to be so exists. It is clear that there is a deep reservoir of willingness to contribute to the church’s mission and serve the local community that exists in the hearts and minds of the clergy and laity throughout the Church of Ireland.

If we can harness that with a missional focus, that recognizes proclamation of the gospel, social justice advocacy, mercy ministries, arts and culture engagement etc, etc, not as mutually competing emphases but the diversity of gifting, given by a creative God where all are required to work together in harmony for the mission to be successful – then I think a major shift would take place.

If such a unifying missional vision were front and centre stage of General Synod then it would perhaps help us look outwards, build on the Service and Unity components of the Bishops Vision paper and perhaps most importantly create a much more real connection between what was happening here, in central church, and what happens in the Parish – making central church’s impact and relevancy more clear to the Parish.

This is a time of enormous challenge and yet opportunity for all the church traditions on this island in fulfilling their mission and calling. What I sense and hear from others outside our church is that in the midst of that that there is an important role and a significant calling for the Church of Ireland.

I hope your Grace that members feel that this report does much to help to move us onwards to embrace the challenges before us and ...

Therefore Your Grace I have much pleasure in proposing the adoption of the report of the Standing Committee by the General Synod of 2011.