

GENERAL SYNOD 2012

BILL NO 1

Proposed by The Rt Revd Ken Good, Bishop of Derry & Raphoe

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

The ubiquitous Preacher's Book – there is one of these in the vestry of every Church of Ireland Church, and several completed ones in the church safe or in the RCB Library.

These books provide a valuable record not only of who preached at and who conducted every service, but of how many people were present, how many received Holy Communion as well as how much was given in the collection.

For years these Preacher's Books have been used to gather basic statistical information about church life in a common, standard format throughout the island. They are a reminder that our church, for a very long time, has acknowledged the value of building up a written record of basic factual information.

There are many things, however, which a Preacher's Book does not tell us. It does not reveal, for example, anything about the age-profile of the congregation – how many were children, how many were teenagers, how many were over 65? We are not told how many were male or how many were female? And there are other things which it would be useful to know – such as how many children were at Sunday School or at some similar activity on a particular Sunday. It might also be of interest to know what percentage the church-going numbers make up of the overall number of parishioners.

Bill No 1 is about the need for the Church of Ireland to gather from parishes and dioceses throughout the Church of Ireland accurate statistical information in a consistent format such that it can readily provide a reliable overview of how things really are 'on the

ground'. When we are planning for the future, it is better to rely less on anecdotal evidence, on conjecture, on intuition, on wishful thinking, or on a hunch that we have, but to rely more on verifiable data and real information.

The real value of these details is not so much in having available the figures for any one year, but rather to be able to compare one year's figures with those from, say, three years previous to discern trends – either of growth or of decline – and thereby to know what is really happening in church life. We know something about how this works in the national Census figures, decade by decade. This Bill allows for a frequency of three years or more in the cycle of information gathering for central church purposes. Dioceses are still at liberty to gather whatever information they decide, with whatever frequency they deem best.

Most dioceses already gather information from parishes; useful information about the number of households belonging to the parish, the numbers attending worship and, in some cases, their age profile on a given Sunday in the year. But there is not, as yet, any consistency of format throughout the dioceses in the way the information is gathered. As a result, it is not possible to collate the data into a form that can be used to discern overall trends. What is being proposed here is not the creation of additional administrative work, but the streamlining and co-ordination of work that is already being undertaken in most dioceses.

In commending this Bill to the Synod, I leave members with the simple axiom, the truism, that ***facts are our friends***. We do not need to be fearful about knowing what is really happening on the ground in parishes and dioceses. Instead of being apprehensive about what accurate research might reveal, we do better to know the facts. When it comes to planning for the future – not least for ministerial needs – it is much more sensible to make informed decisions based on accurate and realistic information, which reflects reality, rather than to build on conjecture. Facts are our friends and we must welcome them.

The Standing Committee, the Commission on Ministry, the Council for Mission, the Episcopal Ministry and Episcopal Structures Working Group and other central church Boards have recognized for some time the desirability of gathering reliable information from every diocese in a common format. This Bill enables the Standing Committee to authorise those with real statistical expertise to develop a common format in which the information we really require is gathered accurately and regularly every three years or so. The Standing Committee will have to ensure that the format is appropriate, realistic and effective.

I urge members of Synod to give their support to this Bill, and wish to thank them for doing so.