

## **GENERAL SYNOD 2012**

### **REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON MINISTRY**

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

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

One of the liveliest debates at last year's General Synod emerged from the Commission on Ministry Report. It was prompted by Archdeacon Gary Hasting's speech - as well as by his writing in the Book of Reports - about the future of the Church of Ireland. His frank comments concerning the reality of decline in parts of the church, albeit described as a slow haemorrhaging rather than a sudden crisis, and his plea that we face this reality with honesty rather than in denial, provoked a healthy discussion in the General Synod, and beyond.

Subsequently, the Commission on Ministry asked me, as Chair, to offer some reflections on how the Bishops' Mission Statement on Growth, Unity and Service might relate to the Archdeacon's analysis. My reflections can be found in the Appendix on page 347, which focuses particularly on the theme of growth.

While neither the clock nor Synod members' stamina would permit me now to develop in full the thesis presented in the Appendix, I do want to make mention of that part of the document which deals with what can be known as 'church planting.' It is the conviction of the Commission that this topic warrants some consideration by the wider church in these days, and hopefully by the Synod right now.

The likely trajectory for traditional churches in Ireland, including the Church of Ireland - as the Archdeacon of Tuam sought to warn us - is, at best, one of maintaining its numerical strength overall, but is more likely to lead to a pattern of decline in many places. By contrast, a fresh engagement with church planting could create the real possibility of numerical growth.

Church planting may have had some unhelpful connotations for some of us in times past, where outsiders came in to our parish, sometimes with little or no communication or discussion, to establish a new church which seemed either to be over against ours or to imply criticism of the effectiveness and validity of what our parish was doing.

Church planting can and should be a much healthier and more wholesome enterprise than that. Such as when a Church of Ireland parish, for example, decides that its witness and ministry could be more effective in its community by establishing, in addition to its existing Sunday worship, a group or an event or a service in a hall, a community centre or some other place, which attracts the interest of those who, for whatever reason, do not find traditional church worship accessible or attractive.

An initiative of this kind would only be taken after communication with the other churches in the community, talking through what is envisaged and maybe involving others in the planning and praying for the new venture.

This approach has already been tried in the Church of Ireland, with very positive results in some places. Real numerical growth has been seen in some parishes, either through a completely new church plant or through a special outreach effort in a church hall to connect with young families.

One of the particular benefits of church planting can be that the traditional parish congregation which chooses to initiate a special outreach of this kind can itself experience a renewed sense of purpose and of calling as it takes responsibility for the growth of a fresh expression of church life. So not only is there quantitative growth in the church plant, but there can be qualitative growth or renewal in the traditional parish church as well.

In the Appendix, I refer to the writing of Rev Tim Keller who argues the case that traditional churches need to take seriously the reality that if we do not engage meaningfully with church planting, the most likely outcome will be long-term and

inevitable decline. The analysis of Archdeacon Hastings would seem to concur. So this is a serious situation and a debate on church planting could be timely.

The reason why this theme is being brought to Synod by the Commission on Ministry is that church-planting has implications for ministry. In recent years our Report has been highlighting the need to train people with the particular gifts needed to lead an outreach initiative of this type. Those trained for more traditional parish ministry may not be best suited to take on the leadership of a church plant.

Your grace, this proposer's speech will be my last as Chair of the Commission on Ministry. Along with Ms Ruth Handy and Archdeacon Gary Hastings, the time has come, under the Terms of Reference of the Commission on Ministry, for me to step down from the Commission at the end of this Synod. I do so with a real sense of gratitude for having had the opportunity to be a member of a body which has been constructive, interesting, energising and practical.

It gives me great pleasure to propose the adoption of the Report of the Commission on Ministry.