

GENERAL SYNOD 2013

Standing Committee Report

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EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Members of Synod, it has long been a custom of the Church of Ireland to land the latest newcomer to a committee with the job of proposing/seconding a report. So here I am, having been naïve enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I thought I would try to make a virtue of it and provide some first impressions of this august body, the Standing Committee. Initially it is somewhat forbidding and it strikes one as being very hierarchical with the bishops and VIPs sitting around the vast board table while the rest of us cluster around the walls. However it soon becomes clear that that is not quite the story. People are given the opportunity to speak, in the main it is very courteous and friendly, there is the occasional exchange of banter with mentions of individuals being follicly challenged, etc and, somewhat like the Synod, the mood can switch from humour to complete seriousness in a moment. It is a very large group so the skill of the chairman is vital and we are blessed in that respect.

Looking at the report and all its appendices you can realise the amount and great variety of topics discussed, debated and passed or rejected, varying from the need or not to add a dotted line to a document, to the Church of Ireland's view on the difficult issue of abortion. One of the things which stands out to me is the amazing dedication, hard work,

and knowledge of the Honorary Secretaries, both lay and clerical, and I wonder how they ever get the time to do the day jobs. They are, of course ably supported by Janet and Garrett. We thank you for this. To-day we remember Dean Herbie Cassidy who laboured at the task for so long.

Much of the work of the committee is done by working parties or sub-committees who report back to the full group at intervals. For example, one of the difficulties encountered by many proposers of projects or changes of strategy in the past, has been the lack of a data base. We don't actually know the numbers of regular attendees at church services on a Sunday by Sunday basis – yes, of course there are registers and Preachers Books, but how accurate are they? It has been suggested that before you are given the answer to the quest for information about numbers, it's not just the Kerry people who want to know why are you asking! Accurate figures help to formulate and analyse strategic options. So last year you may remember that a statute was passed at Synod to enable the collection of reliable statistical information. Hence the hard working Honorary secretaries along with other interested parties have drawn up a Census Form (Appendix E) which each benefice is asked to complete and return before the end of November 2013. At first sight it looks quite forbidding and I can imagine a number of churchwardens throwing their eyes up to heaven in exasperation but the result will be worth it! It will be sent out with full details about how to complete it and should not create any difficulty beyond a minor hiatus in the service for 3 Sundays in November. You will be glad to hear that it is not proposed to do this every year.

Unfortunately, as you read the Report you must have noticed the underlying theme of depletion of resources due to the country's economic situation. This was very apparent when the Priorities Fund Committee submitted their proposals for projects to be funded to the Standing Committee. They had received 70 applications requesting grants amounting to almost €2 million but were able to recommend the allocation of only just under half a million euro to 48 projects. They had a very difficult task but were guided by the Bishops' mission statement on Growth, Unity and Service. The largest proportion of the fund, €125,000 approximately, went to assist Ministry projects while a further €108,000 went to help outreach initiatives. It's exciting to read about some of the latter ideas – it surely is what our church should be about; for example, St. Andrew's Church in Ballysally, Connor has a 3 year project called 'Show the Love – Care in the Community' while the Solas Project run by CORE is working with children from Dublin's inner city. Do read through the list of projects. They are quite inspiring.

The lack of funds is again apparent when examining the work of the Bishops' Appeal Advisory Committee. The income dropped by approximately 20% in 2012 which meant that many worthwhile projects could not be funded. We have been encouraging dioceses and parishes to adopt individual projects under the heading last year of 'Educate for Life' as it was felt that in that way people became better informed about the issues and involved at a more personal level, but maybe it affected the giving to the general funds. We may feel poor in the present times, but we have unimaginable wealth in comparison to a widow trying to raise her own and possibly her orphaned grandchildren in

somewhere like Ethiopia. We must continue to follow the gospel teaching to stand alongside the poor.

However it's not all gloom and doom in the Bishops' Appeal. We had our first Harman Scholar here during the year, studying at Gurteen College as well as attending theological lectures at CITI and Belfast Bible College. Amos is from Rwanda, a lay reader who hopes to be ordained and will then oversee a demonstration farm owned by the diocese which is used to train farmers in agriculture. The fund was set up in memory of Dean Desmond Harman who was a fervent supporter of the Bishops' Appeal fund. It is proposed to have a further scholar in 2015. Our thanks go to CMSI who helped to coordinate his visit and in particular to Canon Ian Poulton who looked after him on the ground.

Our theme this year goes under the tag line of 'Nurturing Hope' and we will be trying to support women's projects, ones that provide education and income-generation so that they may be lifted out of their subjugation and poverty. The Bishops' Appeal is the Church of Ireland's own development fund so I would urge you to support it. Do visit Lydia Monds at the Stand and she will help to enthuse you and make you feel passionate about development work.

It is encouraging to be able to report on the continuing development of the Children's Ministry Network which appears to be going from strength to strength in all the dioceses. The Network focuses on support for local leaders and clergy, on training and on providing information about resources. We are very grateful to all the people who give so much time and energy to this vital work as our future as a church in many ways is in their hands.

Two of the committees reporting to the Standing Committee are proposing to change their methods of working or their structure. For example the Board for Social Theology in Action is suggesting that it transmogrifies, with Synod approval, to CASC – the Church of Ireland Church and Society Commission with the tag line ‘Putting Faith into Action’. It is seeking to be both pro-active in encouraging and developing ways of actively living out the mission of the church and being reactive in providing responses to all sorts of public communications. One of its proactive actions is the production of a DVD which is to be launched at Synod. It is proposed to produce papers on a wide range of subjects which should be of great interest to parishes as they attempt to grapple with the concept of mission. I note that in the report from the Board for Social Responsibility (Northern Ireland) which is in receipt of a grant from the church, they point out that it is becoming at greater arm’s length from the Church control and would like to see a greater participation of clergy and laity in the management of the Board.

Likewise, the Parish Development Working Group is changing its remit in some ways and is setting up a network of people with experience and knowledge in the area of development while also providing resources and a pool of facilitators. They hope to run a bi-annual Parish Development Conference to stimulate activity and interest.

Finally, a subject dear to my heart. The Hard Gospel Implementation Working Group are really looking at the composition of church groups and in particular focusing on the low levels of participation by women and younger people on synods, central church committees, etc and the tendency for individuals to hold onto their committee seats for

ever once they are elected. A motion dealing with this will be put before the House.
Unfortunately we still have with us the issues of sectarianism and racism.

Members of Synod, I have much pleasure in seconding the proposal of the Standing
Committee Report.