

Seconding of Report of Standing Committee to General Synod on Thursday 8 May 2014

The Rev. Gillian Wharton, Diocese of Dublin.

“Embargoed until Delivery”

Check against Delivery

Your Grace, just before seconding the Report of Standing Committee to the General Synod, I would like to say that I am honoured that General Synod has elected me clerical secretary of the General Synod, and thank you for the trust placed in me. As I said in March when elected by Standing Committee to temporarily fill the vacancy created by the retirement of Archdeacon Bantry-White, I was conscious that I would be trying to fill (metaphorically!) rather huge shoes! The last eight weeks has reinforced that. The Church of Ireland owes Robin Bantry-White an enormous debt of gratitude and I am honoured and humbled to be elected to succeed him.

Your Grace, members of General Synod, in seconding the report of Standing Committee to the General Synod, I wish to add to the snapshot given by the proposer, Mr Glenn Moore. Such is the width and amount of work that has come before Standing Committee, and that Standing Committee has dealt with in the past year, that a snapshot of that work, and even of the report itself is all that time will allow.

Glenn, has thanked the honorary secretaries, and having only been an interim or temporary honorary secretary for eight weeks, and therefore having contributed very little in that role, I feel that I can, in all modesty, endorse his sentiments.

Glenn has, as the Primate did in his Address, thanked the staff of Church House, who are not just employed by the church but who serve the church, and who do so with professionalism, with great care and always with courtesy.

As you will be aware from reading the report and from the proposer, Mr Glenn Moore, the items coming before Standing Committee since General Synod 2013 have been varied and many have required detailed responses or action. Standing Committee is grateful to those who contributed to its work.

Submission by the Working Group of the Standing Committee of the Church of Ireland regard the Bill for the Protection of Life during Pregnancy

Members of Synod will be all too aware of the tragedy that pregnancy may end in... for the mother or for the baby, or both.

Since we last met, the government of the Republic of Ireland decided to begin the process of legislation and regulation in the area of the protection of life during pregnancy. We, along with other churches and institutions were asked to make a submission, and on page 212, Appendix A, you will find the Church of Ireland's response to that request. I urge you to read it for it is a careful, detailed and considered response and we are grateful to the members of the working group who made the response on our behalf and particularly record our thanks to Canon Daniel Nuzum in this regard.

We note that in December 2013, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford MLA announced a consultation on Abortion Law in Northern Ireland.

Census

You will all (I hope!) have had the pleasure of filling out those little cards on three Sundays last November.

Thank you to those parishes, and in particular, to the clergy who participated in that census. Whilst parishioners had the relatively simple task of completing the cards on the three Sundays in November, the clergy had to collate the information on the cards – not an easy task when some people ticked more than one box (or neither) for gender and age range! And the clergy had to complete quite a detailed questionnaire, and we are grateful for the time and trouble they took to do so.

The latest returns were received in March, and the response has been extremely high, with just a very small number of parishes not responding. At the Standing Committee meeting in March, it was agreed that expertise was required in helping us to extract the maximum amount of information from the figures, and Dr Bev Botting who is a statistician with the Church of England has agreed to do this work for us and she will be coming to Ireland in the second week of June to begin that process. We look forward to receiving and sharing her conclusions. As you will be aware, this was a 'first off' and even in the early stages, some ambiguities and limitations were recognised, such as trying to define the number of people with whom a rector would have pastoral contact; and the three calendar years from 1 January 2009 to 31 December 2012 which is in fact four years.

But we have begun, and already the gathering of the figures and information has been of benefit as it has enabled parishes to reflect on their 'facts and figures', and likewise has been of benefit in a diocesan context. Regular participation in a census programme in the future will allow the church to plan for the future, centrally, regionally and locally.

Central Communications Board

The report of the Central Communications Board appears as Appendix C on page 235 in the Book of Reports.

With the ever advancing changes in technology the CCB is currently working towards a redesign of the Church of Ireland website. So quickly is technology improving that the idea that once a website is done that it is done is long gone. Many of us here click on the Church of Ireland website at least once a day – it is our quickest method of communication and of providing information. For those outside of the Church of Ireland, who are searching... for a spiritual home, for information... it is our 'shop window'. We look forward to seeing the new-look website.

The negative side of advancing technology is that some of the much-loved more traditional ways of getting information are under threat, and we note with sadness and regret the closure of the Good Book Shop in Belfast and the Sunday School Society Resource Centre in Rathmines in recent times. We are grateful that thebookwell.co.uk and Bestseller of the National Bible Society in Dublin continue to provide much of the resources that enrich our ministry, and that church hymnals, prayer books, baptismal certificates, marriage record books, burial record books, preachers' books, etc. can be purchased from Church of Ireland House.

Children's Ministry

On page 249, is the report of the Children's Ministry Network, in which you will read how this network is continuing to develop and expand its role in supporting and encouraging children's ministry. The new website launched earlier this year is user-friendly and is a rich resource to all who are involved in children's ministry from clergy to Sunday School leaders to parents. Particular mention must be made of the contribution made the Rev. Anne Taylor to the Children's Ministry Network since its inception. Anne, throughout her ministry had been an advocate that children's ministry is the bedrock of ministry. Her vision, enthusiasm and expertise in children's ministry had been key in the establishing of this network, and likewise her involvement in the Sunday School Society and in the annual Building Blocks conferences; and as we wish Anne every blessing in her new post as Vicar of St Peter's Church, Formby, we recognise that her contribution will be a blessing to current and future generations of children.

Complaints Committee and Disciplinary Panel

The Income and Expenditure Accounts for the Complaints Committee and Disciplinary Panel were inadvertently omitted from the Book of Reports and they are available on the General Synod website under the Book of Reports.

The Visit of President Michael D Higgins to England

We are living in privileged times... to see Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh visit the Republic of Ireland almost three years ago, and the welcome that was given to them; and the resulting deepening and enriching of the relationship between these two islands and between north and south has been profound. We wondered how or could it continue to improve and it has: this year, the state visit by President Michael D. Higgins and Mrs Higgins to England and the welcome afforded to them and the Irish in Great Britain has added even further to that. Let us hope and pray that the deepening of such friendships and neighbourliness will enable us all to remember and acknowledge the various 100th anniversaries over the next number of years with dignity and propriety.

Priorities Fund

Yet again the Priorities Fund has continued to serve the church well in the past year. The demands on its resources are many. Those who serve on the committee and the secretary Mrs Sylvia Simpson go to great lengths to ensure that they are administering the funds entrusted to them wisely and well, for the benefit of church and community. At the March meeting of the Standing Committee, the Priorities Fund reports to Standing Committee and there is always a robust examination of the report; while some may not be happy with the response that their particular project or request received, all of us respect and acknowledge the criteria and the manner in which it is applied.

Glenn and I have given you a whistle-stop tour of some of what Standing Committee has done on your behalf.

Your Grace, I am pleased to second the report of Standing Committee.