

Speech proposing the report of the *Select Committee on Human Sexuality in the context of Christian Belief* to be given on Day 3 by John Mann (Connor Diocese)

Your Grace, members of Synod, brothers and sisters in Christ, may I take this opportunity to both update you on the progress of the Select Committee and then speak on our hopes for the future.

Since the meeting of General Synod in 2014 there have been two broad areas of work that have been undertaken by the committee. One has been to work on a substantial document which we hope will become the touchstone for the further conversations in the Church of Ireland on issues relating to same sex attraction in a Christian fellowship. The second was a discrete piece of work carried out in the autumn of 2014 whereby members of the Church of Ireland were invited to speak to representatives of the committee on these very issues. I will enlarge on both of these pieces of work in a moment, but first may I reiterate the answer to a point that has been raised a number of times by those concerned that the Select Committee has exclusively focused on these same sex issues without giving time and effort to other matters relating to human sexuality and Christian belief.

The answer to this is quite straightforward, in fact: It is purely a matter of time constraint. Many hours work, both in committee and in preparation for its meetings, have been spent by the members over a very complex and highly sensitive matter. We have given as much time as we physically have been able over the past eighteen months or so and still there is more to be read; further scholarship to consider; other peoples to hear, so the answer must be to concentrate on what is most pressing. So this is what we have done.

Let us consider the first piece of work: The 'Guide' to the ongoing conversations within the Church of Ireland. This, once finished, is to be a substantial document that is close to completion now and should be available for the projected launch at the beginning of October, both in Belfast and Dublin. It contains some material that is generated by the whole committee, specific articles written by individuals for incorporation in the Guide for our assistance, and numerous references to other pieces of work that should be a helpful resource to all who are interested in furthering their understanding of this important matter.

Let me give you a flavour of what will be there for us by running down the contents: after a foreword by me, there are two theological papers contributed by Dr William Olhausen and Dr Andrew Pierce. Then we look at some matters of fact regarding the establishment of the Select Committee itself and its remit. Part 2 looks at Anglican approaches to theological and ethical inquiry. Part 3 examines the changing context of society and church in Ireland and elsewhere and contains a substantial reminder of how the Church of Ireland has been dealing with the issue of same sex attraction through pastoral letters, conferences and in this body, the General Synod. Some reference is made to the Porvoo Churches and, very importantly for us, to the Methodist Church in Ireland. Part 4 speaks of the listening process – and I will say more on that in a moment – whilst part 5 charts the Church's ways of dealing with disagreement. There are appendices also to help with terms used, other resources and references. It runs to something like 80 pages of fairly closely typed text. It is fair to say that the Select Committee is not expecting this to be essential reading for all the clergy and members of General Synod, but it is the basic document that the Committee is producing

for the Church of Ireland as a resource for our conversations. There is to be a much briefer summary leaflet with a short study programme that will be made as user friendly as we can achieve to help parish groups and others engage with the issues. It will reference parts of the full guide and we hope that it may stimulate response.

The second piece of work undertaken by the Select Committee has been to establish a formal listening process, whereby individuals and groups are able to contribute from personal testimony to the common understanding of the Church of Ireland, as it seeks to hear of the experiences of those attracted to members of their own sex and living within the Church, either currently or in the past. The records of these meetings run to something of the order of 140 pages, which have been reduced to a summary three pages for the Guide, giving the main themes and concerns, whilst removing all names, parishes or other identifiable information. The Select Committee would like to thank all who have freely given of their time and their personal reflections and feelings to assist this work.

Can I emphasise once again the complexity of the work in which the Select Committee is involved; the ongoing spirit of respect and love with which opinions are shared, whilst appreciating too the robust views being offered with integrity, as all seek to contribute from a common basis of commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ, through faith in his redeeming power, and confidence in his risen life and active presence in the Church which is his body.

The Archbishop of Armagh is to be present for the launch of the Guide and its summary and study companion in the first week of October. His Grace has also contributed a prayer that will feature as part of both documents, for suggested use by all who study them. It runs:

*Most merciful God,
you have created us, male and female, in your own image,
and have borne the cost of all our judgments in the death of your Son;
help us so to be attentive to the voices of Scripture, of humanity and of the Holy Spirit,
that we may discern your will within the issues of our time,
and, respectful both of conscience and of conviction,
may direct our common life towards the perfection of our humanity that is in Christ alone,
in whom truth and love are one.
We ask this in his name. **Amen.***