

GENERAL SYNOD 2016

Report of the Representative Church Body Seconder: The Most Revd Pat Storey

**Embargoed Against Delivery
Check Against Delivery**

Sometimes it is good to remind yourself why something exists. Before I was on the House of Bishops I understood the RB to exist for finance and property and therein lay its remit. Whilst this is true, it is comforting to see on p32 of the report that the RB exists primarily “to have a duty of care to past, present and future generations.” The RB does expend its time and energy on money and monuments (and frankly I am glad someone does!), but it does so because it has a ‘duty of care’. I find this somewhat reassuring! So what are some of the things that the RB champions other than the buildings that we sit in Sunday by Sunday and the financing that this inevitably demands?

A huge amount of time has been spent recently on the new charities legislation, which is now well in hand. Dioceses and parishes have been painstakingly learning how to register – in particular those that are in the pilot project – and thankfully obliging. In Northern Ireland, the registration is well underway – Clogher has yet to begin and is waiting for the nod from the Charity Commission when the parishes in the other northern dioceses are processed and added to the register. In the Republic of Ireland, the process has been halted for the meantime by the Charities Regulatory Authority while a procedure for group registrations is agreed in consultation with the Church. We hope that registration of parishes in the Republic of Ireland will recommence later in 2016. The income threshold above which a full audit is required has already been raised to £250,000 in the North, and the Church has responded to a consultation in the Republic of Ireland and seeks a similar level to be applied. Thank you to our diocesan secretaries and parish treasurers who have risen to the challenge of this new legislation which will not only create a register of charities but will also introduce an era of greater transparency in regulation of charities! The experience of preparing for registration can be frustrating, but is also rewarding. It enables us to review our purpose and how we actively support the mission of the Church at both parish and Church-wide level. Reporting will provide an opportunity to broaden our witness and to sharpen our focus on Christian mission.

One of the things that became clear as parishes registered was the existence of some assets that are assumed to belong to the parish but are neither included in parish accounts nor vested in the RCB. These are often vested in or managed by people referred to as local trustees.

Where local trustees are supported by legal documentation that makes clear that the assets are both charitable for the advancement of religion and held on behalf of a particular parish, and where, upon the retirement or death of a trustee, the select vestry has the right of appointment of new trustees, all is probably well. These trustees will be able to either register their assets independently with the charities authority or the select vestry will be able to include them in the parish registration as restricted parish trusts. However, where there is lack of legal clarity, parishes will have to undertake considerable work to satisfy the regulators of the relationship of these assets to the select vestry and of their charitable status. As any deficiency can lead to considerable difficulty and expense, the RB has established a pilot project to assist parishes by looking into the issues involved and the RB will make recommendations in due course as to how these local trustee issues should be addressed. The pilot will look at diocesan and parochial trusts, and I am glad to be able to report that we already have the agreement of Derry Diocese to help us by acting as the diocesan guinea-pig.

Again, a massive amount of work has been done in bringing forward through Standing Committee our new Dignity Charter. Initially three new policies are being implemented across the Church in the areas of: the prevention of bullying and harassment; grievances of members of the clergy; and long-term illness of members of the clergy.

With respect to the long-term clergy illness policy it is envisaged that after a year of illness and being off work, a conversation may begin with the Bishop to discuss a clergyperson's options. Last year General Synod approved that the Clergy and Ministry Protection Fund, the old Severance Fund, could in future be accessed in cases where clergy had to step back from ministry due to long term illness. There is a resolution this year that the levy that created the fund, which has been suspended since 2007, should be reinstated with this additional responsibility in mind. The fund has been accessed in a number of cases over the last few years in ways that have assisted clergy and their families to move on from difficult circumstances, and have helped parishes trapped by the same problems.

In order to help clergy and parishes, the RB is in the middle of a recruitment process for an HR person to help guide us through these new measures.

It is vital to understand the purpose of the Dignity Charter, which is set out on its opening page. It "articulates the Church's commitment to harmonious relationships in Church life

with reference to the Christian principles underpinning those relationship.” Thus, It is to help and not to hinder.

“A little boy wanted €100 badly and prayed for one week but nothing happened. Then he decided to write God a letter requesting €100. When the postal authorities received the letter addressed to God, they decided to send it to the Taoiseach. The Taoiseach was so impressed, touched and amused that he instructed his secretary to send the little boy a €5 note. The Taoiseach thought this would appear to be a lot of money to a little boy. The boy was delighted with the €5 and sat down to write a thank you note to God, which read: ‘Dear God, thank you very much for sending the money. However, I noticed that for some reason you had to send it through the Dáil, and as usual, they took most of it.’”

At Church House, we too are subject to the vagaries of taxation, so we have every sympathy with this little lad’s plight!

The RB has also used its money and resources to help with the funding of university chaplaincies in line with the hopes expressed in *Long Term Church*. We are using our money in ‘shaping to serve’ in the knowledge that via our last census we discovered that 39% of our worshippers are over 61 years of age. Investment is strongly required in children, youth and young adults. The investment in university chaplaincies is to help to address that. Alongside all of these the RB continues to support clergy training and to help clergy spouses in need of housing or financial aid.

So those are a few areas in addition to maintaining property where the RB has invested its resources. So now let me ask a question that is pertinent to some: how does the RB invest its resources? If you are interested in the detail of this, perhaps you would carefully read Appendices D and E which indicate our investment policy regarding environmental, social and governance or ESG, and our approach to the challenges of climate change. The RB is acutely aware of its stewardship responsibility and it is important to note that the Investment Committee monitors this constantly. We aim for a low carbon economy and we cease investing in areas that are contrary to our ethos, for example, strategic military sales and tobacco. We are consistently attempting to balance our investment in renewable energy alongside fossil fuels and our portfolio demonstrates a positive bias towards renewable and green investments. We no longer invest in thermal coal nor in a company where more than 10% of its turnover is derived from coal mining. This is a most challenging area, but we are progressing.

Let me return to where I began – the RB exists, not just to distribute money that helps retain old buildings (although it does that), but out of a “duty of care to past, present and future

generations.” This is an admirable aim. I would like to thank all volunteers who give of their time and energy on RB. Like most church matters, it is not an easy task, but it is rewarding. So thank you for all you give and give generously.

Money is the last taboo. We hate talking about it. Yet we have to talk about it. We are grateful to the RB for their wise investments and solid control over our finances, and more than this, we are grateful to God for His provision for us year after year. The costs are enormous; the giving is generous; but our God cares even about every hair on our head.

Finally. A little kid asks his Dad: “Daddy, how much does it cost to get married?” “No idea” replied the father, “I’m still paying for it!”