

Standing Committee Report

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EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Archbishop, Members of the General Synod,

Rumour has it that at every opportunity the clergy will try to look for discount. The story is told of a young curate who chose a new suit and then asked for a reduction in the price with the words, 'I'm only a poor preacher'. To which the tailor promptly replied, 'Yes, I know. I've heard you preach!' All of which brings me somehow to the **Report of the Standing Committee**. It may be this afternoon that the Synod will want to ask many questions of its Committee, however the one thing which can be said with confidence is that Synod has not been 'short-changed' either in terms of members' time, money spent or indeed by the range of the Standing Committee's workload. Even an overview of the 33 sections itemised in the Report, not to mention the Appendices that follow, will quickly disclose a quite staggering breadth to the Standing Committee's remit. In the past year issues dealt with have included the theological, liturgical, ecumenical, administrative, financial, social, pastoral, legal, ethical and charitable. In fact, it is somewhat difficult to know where exactly one ought to begin. So, rather like the preacher (poor or otherwise!) who simply mentioned the word 'God' and then told his congregation to go home and think about Him, I should like to hang my thoughts around a single word which, it seems to me, is a recurring theme in these 90 pages: '**Transition**'.

To be the Church of God requires first and foremost faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our primary task has to be that of mission. We live today in a post-Christian society, yet whereas people's aspirations may manifest themselves in ways which are

subtly different to even only a few years ago, it is the same gospel that those people need to hear. I would be the first to admit that the SC can too readily become preoccupied with mundane matters of procedure and structure. However, sometimes it is the very re-working of these things that causes the church to re-evaluate its purpose, and to renew a commitment to its mission in the light of present social needs. Transition, therefore, is the watchword.

For example, on p.128 you will reference to a new format and vision for **CIYD**. Few of us can be unaware of the difficulties which there have been in implementing a coherent strategy for the youth ministry of our Church, but the SC has now ratified a proposal from the YD itself for re-structuring. This is based upon the twin principles of decentralisation and a reduction in bureaucracy, and in turn, it will allow for a wider dissemination of funding to diocesan and grass-roots projects, which has already started to happen. There is to be no formal report from the YD until next year's Synod, however it undoubtedly represents a real window of opportunity and an exciting way forward.

Transition is also evident in what was formerly known as the Role of the Church Committee (also p.128) - this matter was first reported to last year's Synod. In future this is to be known as the **Church in Society Committee**, and again there is to be a radical re-structuring with the emphasis on specialist, even single-issue, sub-groups. For effective Christian witness to this island it is imperative that the Church is heard to speak with a clear voice on questions of social concern. Not so very long ago I was talking with someone on the train to Belfast who expressed dismay, as a member of the COI, that too often our Church in particular seems more concerned with trying to

appear balanced and popular, to the detriment of saying with conviction what it truly believes. We may wish to disagree, but we cannot deny that gentleman the validity of his perception. To speak out must mean doing justice to a variety of differing viewpoints, as happened in our submission to the Abortion hearing of the Oireachtas, but the essential thing is that the Church of Jesus Christ is constantly able to make a vital contribution to public debate (cf Europe). For too long the Church of Ireland has been lagging behind other denominations in this regard, and it is very much my hope that over time the new Church in Society Committee will become one of the most strategic of all Church committees.

I turn next to the delicate and thorny issue of **sectarianism** (p.140 and Appendices K&L). Since 1999, when its first report came to Synod, the Sectarianism Steering Group has been seeking to weigh up its continuing role within the Church of Ireland. SC has now approved a resolution which allows for a Sectarianism Education Project and the provision of a Working Group. This latter intends to pursue a Scoping Study under the consultancy of Dr. Gareth Higgins, and it will bring a further report to next year's General Synod. Sectarian attitudes are sadly endemic within too many aspects of life in these islands. It is entirely appropriate that the Church should continue both to reform itself and to press its case in the wider community. Having said that, however, there is also an urgent need for wisdom and sensitivity lest Church programmes begin to lose touch with the realities of people's everyday experience. For many Protestants – which is our side of the historic divide on this island - life in Northern Ireland today has indeed become 'a cold house', and the last thing the Church of Ireland can afford is to become alienated from its own grassroots. Those clergy and lay members of our Church who have helped to pioneer the Loyalist

Commission are to be commended for their efforts, and the wider Church would do well to learn from their insights. In making any pronouncement against sectarianism, the danger is that we inadvertently become sectarian ourselves, only in a potentially more damaging way since pride and an inevitable sense of detachment can also be at work. As I have already urged, conviction is essential, but in this highly charged matter it must be carried through with the utmost even-handedness.

One final example of Transition at work can be seen on p.127, and here I refer to the **Christian Stewardship Committee**. At the request of the RB Mr. John Truscott presented a lengthy report with recommendations for the future of CS. It is his considered view that the organisation, having served an essential purpose in the life of the COI for the past forty years, has now run its course and ought to be replaced with a more contemporary approach to the whole matter of giving. With no little heart-searching both the SC and the CSCC have accepted this broad principle. To recognise that any such body has come to the end of its useful lifespan is not easy. It takes much courage to realise that certain things within the kingdom of God are but for a season. On behalf of the SC and the GS and the many parishes which have benefited from the input of CS I should like to pay tribute to Mr Murray Hunter and his staff. Together they have offered the Church an enormous service, and in this Truscott Report they have given to us what I believe to be one of the most significant of any recent documents. In addition to addressing of the matter of giving which it is emphasised ought to be proportional (that in itself has the potential to solve many of our financial pressures), the Report calls for a clearer appraisal of both lay training and home visitations not for the purpose of raising extra money, but rather for evangelism. In all of our transitioning this is surely the most essential.

Archbishop, on pp.121-122 Synod will find a list of the SC's membership. For better or worse, whether we like it or not, that is who we are - northern, southern, conservative and catholic. The SC is nothing other than a microcosm of the Church itself, and for the most part I would say its is a positive and united body of people. For those who are able (and this is something not mentioned in the Report) meetings begin in prayer and around the Lord's Table, permission is granted for mature disagreement, and I have always observed respect for diverse opinions. I am grateful to my fellow members for this opportunity, and it gives me pleasure to propose that the Report of the Standing Committee be adopted.