

General Synod 2003 – Standing Committee Report

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Although it has been done many times before, it may be appropriate in this, the first year of a new triennium, with many new members present, to summarise briefly the constitution of the Standing Committee. The Committee is the permanent executive body of the General Synod, carrying out, as far as possible, the duties of the Synod throughout the year when the Synod itself is not in session. The Committee consists of the Archbishops, the Bishops and the Honorary Secretaries, all of whom are ex-officio members, as well as two clerical and two lay elected representatives from each diocese, one of each being under and one over the age of forty-five – with adjustments to this rule where necessary. There are also seven co-opted members. The Committee is, therefore, democratically established, widely based and representative of the whole Church.

As a long-time member, two issues relating to the role and function of the Committee generally have always concerned me: firstly, its relationship with, and the relevance of its work to, the members of the Church in the parishes, and, secondly, its position as a leadership body, representing, and often charged with speaking on behalf of, the Church. I intend to mention these two matters briefly, and Canon Davison, in seconding, will address some of the items in the Report.

With regard to the first, as someone with long experience in diocesan affairs, I am absolutely convinced of the over-riding importance of the local level within the Church. The Church of Ireland exists in the parishes, on the ground, with the ordinary parishioners. Sometimes, I feel, at central level, that perspective can be lost sight of. I have, once or twice, pointed out at meetings that the majority of people in the parishes really have little or no idea that we exist, let alone any knowledge of what we are doing, and, on one occasion, the comment was made that perhaps it was just as well! I hope that that is not the case. The relationship of central bodies to grass roots is problematical not only in the Church but throughout society and not least in the state and governmental area. There is always a divide and no easy way in which to bridge the gap, but we have to, at least, try to be relevant to those who are the basis of our organisation.

The business which comes before the Committee at its normal six ordinary meetings each year is varied and complex. Agenda items frequently relate to very serious and weighty issues, which must be considered and decisions taken. In the heat of debate, however, there can sometimes be a danger of equating our own importance with that of the matter under discussion. A former Honorary Secretary, the late Dean John Crooks of Armagh, had a way of bringing the Committee down to earth in the wake of some piece of high-flown rhetoric by remarking, ‘we should remember who we are’. He was right. Anyone familiar with the Church of Ireland on the ground, particularly in the south, as I am, knows that we are a very small Church indeed – respected and held in high regard, and, through kindness and courtesy, generally granted a significance and a standing in the community which, in truth, far exceeds what our numbers would merit. But we do need to remember who we are, and those of us at central level do need to bear in mind who and what we represent, why we are there and not to over-estimate our importance and significance.

The Church of Ireland is an independent Church, running its own affairs. We do need to keep in touch on the ecumenical and inter-church levels at home and abroad – that is fully accepted. However, it often seems to me that we do seem to consider ourselves a vital part of each and every process which takes place at all levels. At most meetings of the Standing Committee, someone or some persons are appointed to represent us at something somewhere, either in Ireland or far beyond. These appointments usually result in written reports to the Committee, from which it is evident that those concerned enjoyed the various experiences. The report is then noted. How does all of this activity relate to the Church in the parishes? How relevant is it? In some cases, possibly, it is beneficial – if indirectly. In others well I wonder. Members can judge to some extent for themselves from the list of appointments on pages 149 and 150 of the Report, not forgetting that some appointments, particularly in the ecumenical and inter-church area are ongoing and do not appear every year. We need to do the right thing, but we also need to remember who we are. We *have* a significance and importance, but we are not the Church of England, the Episcopal Church of the United States or a Church with state funding and we do not have resources to match. We need to remember this when allocating ours.

On page 151, it is reported that the production of 5,500 copies of a large-print edition of the Church Hymnal was authorised, so that a number of copies could be held by each parish for those who might specifically require them. The production of the Hymnal was a major undertaking and I would be the first to salute and thank those involved for the enormous amount of time, effort and expertise given, resulting in something of which, I think, we can be justly proud. However, it is very difficult to explain to people in parishes why copies of the large-print edition are not freely available to be purchased by everyone, when that is exactly what they wanted from the outset. I do think that in this case we lost sight of where we are coming from and it carries a lesson for the future.

Concerning the second matter, I have sometimes found that, in as far as Church members relate to central activity at all, it is in terms of expectation of comments on current affairs (and this expectation also extends to clergy and particularly bishops.) People often expect the Church to ‘say something’ on a particular matter. I think, however, that we need to exercise some caution, particularly in the political arena. The Church of Ireland is not a political party with policies, or a pressure group representing sectional interests. It cannot always express a view on every issue of the day on behalf of its members – and it certainly cannot tell its members what to think on such matters. Individual members of the Church have individual views and can *not* be spoken for by the Church in all matters. You, Your Grace, have frequently remarked on the ability of members of the General Synod with opposing and conflicting political views to work together within its framework and this, I think provides a model. I, for one, was very uneasy last year to read reports to the effect that, ‘The Church of Ireland supports a *Yes* vote in the Nice Treaty Referendum’. It wasn’t true, of course, because the Church as a body did not advocate a vote in either direction and could not have done so. The matter, which was much more complex and less clear-cut than was often portrayed at the time, was handled by the Church in Society Committee making a comprehensive statement *setting out the issues*, as will be seen from Section 31 of the Report on page 160.

The question of the recent War in Iraq was also dealt with in a statement by that Committee, contained, in Appendix E to its Report on page 223. In this instance, the Standing Committee

itself did consider making a statement, but felt unable to do so, due to differing views within the Committee, which reflected the position in the Church and society at large. This diversity of opinion, and its consequences, have to be accepted. Individuals, including bishops and those in leadership positions, are quite entitled to comment as they see fit, bearing in mind the positions which they hold, but that is as far as it can go.

The practice of a group speaking from within the Church, as an appointed body, but not specifically or necessarily on behalf of all of its members, was initiated by the Role of the Church Committee. The legacy of that Committee has now been handed on to the Church in Society Committee and, while some may regret the passing of the glory days of the former Committee under Bishop Samuel Poyntz and Mr. Jim McGaffin, when its Report evoked enormous publicity, perhaps the more low key approach of its successor is a logical development and more appropriate in present circumstances. The Committee, chaired by the Bishop of Clogher, sets out the manner of its working in the Preamble to its Report, on page 201, which, I think, is well worth reading.

It would be remiss for the proposer of this Report not to acknowledge the debt owed by the Standing Committee and the Synod to the Honorary Secretaries. The extent of the issues dealt with gives an indication of the work-load which they carry. It is a source of wonder to me that they are able to undertake so much on a voluntary basis in the course of their own full and busy lives and the many other commitments which they have within and outside the Church. The day-to-day work of the Synod and the Standing Committee is, of course, carried on by the staff in Church House. As will be seen in section 6 on page 148, Ms Valerie Beatty resigned as Assistant Secretary during the year and was replaced by Mrs. Janet Maxwell. Valerie brought talent and flair to the work of the General Synod and its organisation and we thank her for her contribution. It is good to note that the female presence has been retained and we welcome Janet to her new and increased responsibilities in Church House. Derek Phillips, our Synod Officer, has served the Church for many years and has been involved in its work for even longer than I have myself! We thank him for his dedication, constant helpfulness and courtesy.