

GENERAL SYNOD 2005 –
STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT

Proposer: The Revd Canon Patrick Harvey (Cashel & Ossory)

Embargoed until delivery.

Archbishop, and members of General Synod, the Standing Committee met five times between June of last year and last March and has dealt with some very important issues as well as with what we could call ordinary housekeeping. As you know its function is to carry out the business of General Synod, while Synod is not in session. The agenda can be very varied, for example over the last year it included the Windsor Report, new Regulations for Marriage within the Church of Ireland, and new Legislation here in the Republic, Synodical Reform, the Hard Gospel initiative, the Bishops' Appeal, Parish Development, Local Covenant Partnerships with the Methodist Church, the Porvoo Communion, Visual Liturgy ... helping fund software allowing parishes to publish their own service booklets, as well as reflecting on its contributions to various ecumenical bodies, and planning future meetings of the General Synod.

The Committee consists substantially of the Archbishops and Bishops as well as clerical and lay representatives from all twelve Dioceses. There are seventy one members. Speaking as a relative newcomer to the

Committee, and having been nominated to make this proposing speech in the time honoured tradition of the Church of Ireland, at a meeting I could not attend, I take this opportunity of drawing your attention to some aspects of Standing Committee and its work. As a member one can hear, for example, the Bishop of Limerick quote Machiavelli, surely one of the least Machiavellian of all our Bishops, “Princes should not come together where their Lieutenants have not met”. A plea for local decision making, in the context of the Windsor Report. We hear from time to time from members who have been sent to attend other Synods and Annual Conferences and ecumenical gatherings, some near, some very far away. This is most interesting. George Clarke and Bishop Ken Clarke attended the Methodist Church in Ireland Annual Conference. They make several points including how they were impressed with the total openness about successes and failures, and how the frequent sharing of personal and congregational stories was given high priority. This was a conference with a human face. We learn from the Bishop of Connor that at the Church of England Synod there is no Presidential Address, which is so much an integral part of ours ... the very idea your Grace ... nor is there a book of reports, and therefore no page by page discussion. Instead debates focus upon specific issues of importance or public interest.

One of the most public of issues dealt with by the Committee was the Windsor Report. The Anglican Communion came under intense scrutiny from the world's media as an expert group under the Chairmanship of our President, the Archbishop of Armagh, met for twelve months at the request of the Anglican Primates to explore the implications for communion following the appointment of a practising gay bishop in the United States of America and the blessing of same sex relationships in Canada. Despite the fact that the working group had been asked to reflect on the nature of communion, it was the issue of sexuality which continued to hit the headlines. Archbishop you have written that as the Lambeth Commission struggled with its mandate questions surfaced time and again which were to prove of equal if not more importance than the issues addressed in the text of the report. One such question you identify is ~ "How much do we value the bonds of communion?"

The Anglican Primates subsequently met in the Dromantine Conference Centre to discuss the report. Standing Committee also brought together a group, and their preliminary response to the four questions posed for them was considered by Standing Committee last January. All Synod members will have received a copy of an amended document. There is nothing untoward in the production of a separate publication, it is simply the

result of editing errors in the original Book of Reports. This preliminary response places on record our appreciation of and admiration for the work of the Chairman of the Lambeth Commission, Archbishop Eames, without whose wisdom and skill the Report would have been a much impoverished document. It also stands as the Church of Ireland's reaction to the Windsor report, and was forwarded to the Anglican Communion for consideration by the Primates at their meeting last January in Dromantine. Its focuses include the suggested enlarging of the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury, how he is appointed, apprehensiveness about the creation of an "Anglican Curia", and the apparent complexity of the proposed Anglican Covenant.

With the introduction of new marriage legislation in Northern Ireland, came the end of the time honoured tradition of the reading of banns. The traditional triple reading of the couples' names at services of worship in a stable and relatively immobile community has almost gone. The demands of a more secular and media influenced society clamour in our ears. This is even parodied by the media itself. In a recent episode of the Simpsons, Homer found himself being chased through Springfield by the likes of the Teletubbies, Yo Yo Ma and Garrison Keillor. Eventually he escapes to an island in the South Pacific to become a missionary, and at last we hear him admit "Wait, I'm no missionary, I don't even believe in Jebus". The

secularisation of society now brings demands on Churches unimagined a generation ago. One of the Churches in the Group of Parishes where I am Rector is at the foot of a hill, on the top of which lies a very splendid hotel which specializes in providing wedding receptions. As you will know the pattern is changing, there are those couples who choose their hotel and then look around for a suitable Church. Couples now want to come to that Church to marry and then go up the hill to the hotel, where they might pay €20,000 for the meal alone. People are becoming more and more individual, if I can put it like that, in the requests they make for the shape of the wedding. They know what they want when they're planning their marriage, even if we don't! I'm not suggesting that the couples don't take their vows seriously, it's the trappings which threaten to overwhelm the occasion. The Church of Ireland is now introducing a scheme for regulating marriages, the conditions include that the ceremony must be in accordance with the Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of Ireland, and must take place in a Church or Chapel of the Church of Ireland duly consecrated for public worship, unless the circumstances are wholly exceptional. The possibility now of requests for marriages in unusual locations with unusual liturgies means that these two very basic conditions have to be stated. The scheme also regulates how clergy in each Diocese will be registered as people who can officiate at

marriages, and also how Church marriage records should be kept, as distinct from the way the State records them. One important change in the State legislation is that responsibility for registering their marriage lies with the marrying couple and not with the clergy.

The Bishops' Appeal continues its vital work, undoubtedly the highest profile disaster was the St. Stephen's Day Tsunami, and the response to the Archbishops' special appeal was remarkable. There are of course many areas of disaster and need which are not high profile at all, and the Appeal continues its important work in these areas too.

Following on from this I note that tucked away in the Standing Committee report is a three line paragraph which concerns an issue that makes many of the issues we will deal with today pale into insignificance, it's something I don't think we, as a Church, have really grappled with, it may be that we don't think there is anything we can do about it, and perhaps there are some of us here who believe that it has no part in any of the agendas of any committee of the Church. I beg to disagree. It is the issue of global warming, caring for the planet we live on, having a greater awareness of the effects we have on the environment. If we proclaim that the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, we would do well to focus on this issue. What efforts have we made as a Church, for example, to lobby any Government

about their obligations in the context of international agreements, for example the one established at Kyoto. The answer is none. I would be glad to be contradicted if I am wrong. Certainly what we do in Synod and in Standing Committee is about prioritising the many things we can be involved in, and they are legion, but I believe this should be one of the most important issues we deal with as a Church. I acknowledge the noble work that Stella Mew's sub-committee is doing to highlight awareness of these issues.

From time to time the point is made at meetings that sending delegates from the Church of Ireland to ecumenical gatherings around the world is costly, in some peoples' view, too costly. In view of this Standing Committee requested the Committee for Christian Unity to try to make some judgement on how valuable these contacts are and to make suggestions for the future. The report, which is included as Appendix F, reflects on the five ecumenical bodies of which the Church of Ireland is a member, and concludes that it is a difficult task to say categorically how much value there is in belonging to these bodies, but that it is positive and most desirable to continue. It concludes that being part of such bodies exposes us to richness of diversity in worship, ministry, witness and affects the type of leadership

provided in the Church of Ireland. One suggestion which is made is that there could be more effective reporting of the ecumenical contacts.

I would like to take this opportunity of paying tribute to the work of Dean Herbie Cassidy who retired during the year as one of the Honorary Secretaries, and also to Brian Parker, who was Press Officer for the Church of Ireland. On behalf of General Synod I thank them for their distinctive contributions to the life of our Church.

Your Grace, I have much pleasure in proposing that the Report of the Standing Committee be received and adopted.