

General Synod 2019

Report to the Commission on Ministry

Proposer: Philip McKinley

Archbishop, Members of Synod.

Eight years ago the then Rector of Galway and Archdeacon of Tuam, Venerable Gary Hastings set a new record, when he became the first member of General Synod to make front page newspaper headlines based solely on his Proposer's Speech to the Report of the Commission on Ministry! He really set the bar high for the rest of us!

Referring to the future of the Church of Ireland he said, "Metaphors of cancer and the Titanic may be too dramatic, it's more a matter of slow, quiet respectable deflation, a gentle haemorrhaging allowing us to drift off to sleep in the damp and hallowed halls of elder glory. If it is a crisis, it is a crisis in slow motion".

His comments may have appeared to be stark, even apocalyptic, but they did strike a timely chord both within the Church and wider society, as he appealed for 'honesty rather than denial'.

He predicted that, "in 20 years' time, or possibly before that, many small rural churches will either be gone, or on their last legs".

Since that speech eight years ago, there has been one national Census in Northern Ireland in 2011, two in the Republic of Ireland in 2011 and 2016, in addition to two internal Church of Ireland Censuses (in 2013 and 2016), as well as a variety of external analysis, such as Barna Research's 2017 publication, 'Finding Faith in Ireland' and the 2018 publication of the Irish Centre for Religious Education's religious practice survey. All of this data points undoubtedly towards an overall statistical and numeric decline in Church of Ireland practice and belonging.

Indeed speaking just two months ago in St Michael's Church of Ireland Church, in Pery Square, Limerick for its 175th Anniversary celebrations, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Diarmuid Martin said, 'I do not believe that people have a true sense of the crisis of faith that exists in Ireland'.

Rather than plunging the Church into a self-fulfilling doomsday prophecy; time has now shown that Archdeacon Hastings comments in fact proved somewhat of a catalyst, because they set in motion a series of responses, some of which are still being outworked in the Commission on Ministry today. Yes the issues are serious, but so too has been the response.

This year's Report refers for example to a Colloquium on Ministry organised by SEARCH, which took place in March in Trinity College Dublin. There were an extraordinarily broad range of issues discussed at this Colloquium and the fact that it was so well attended, points perhaps to a wider thirst in which to explore creatively and courageously dynamic expressions of ministry for the future.

The Commission spent significant time this year exploring support for non-parochial posts, such as “covenant partnerships, new expressions/pioneer ministries and Chaplaincies”, none of whom are defined in the Constitution and yet all of whom surely have critical roles to play in the future of our Church. Alongside these, the Commission continued its work to explore procedures for Boards of Nomination and to organise retreats for Holy Week, Advent and Mid-Ministry. In relation to these I note that there are still some spaces available for the next Mid-Ministry retreat which will be led by former Corrymeela Community Leader Pádraig O’Tuama on the 3rd-5th June in the Church of Ireland Theological Institute. Registration is also open for this year’s Advent Retreat which will be led by Canon Michael Mitton from the 28th-30th November, in Dromantine, Co Down.

The Commission also wishes to explore in greater depth next year, ways in which to sustain and energise rural ministry, to encourage lay spirituality and to explore diversity in leadership and service. We would therefore warmly welcome your reflections on these.

Far from denial, the Commission is working hard to address some of the most pressing and challenging issues facing the Church today.

It is therefore most encouraging to note the successful launch of Ordained Local Ministry, which the Commission spent a number of years exploring in great depth. 26 candidates from eight dioceses began training in September 2018 and a further 10 will start this coming September, all in addition to those training for the CITI Masters in Theology. Bishops will now have to prepare for a significant increase in ordination services!

Indeed if one word can summarise the key work of the Commission this year, it is ‘vocation’. Against the backdrop of such shifting dynamics between faith and culture, there is a vital importance to encourage a new generation of vocations, to respond in Christian service to God’s mission through the Church.

The challenges Archdeacon Hastings outlined eight years ago haven’t gone away, they are stark, but in proposing this Report of the Commission on Ministry for the adoption of this Synod, I believe that there is a growing determination both within the Commission and the wider Church to tackle these challenges head-on, with ‘honesty rather than denial’.

We are therefore very excited to formally launch now our brand new video on Vocations, which will be circulated widely throughout the Church and wider society, for use this coming Vocation Sunday, 15th September.