

Representative Body Report

Secunder: Bishop Ken Good

I could begin by feigning a great indebtedness to members of the RB for their generous retirement-gift to me – the great privilege of being asked to deliver a seconding speech to commend their report!

But, in actual fact, I do ask you to believe me when I say that I really am pleased to have the opportunity before I retire to express, in this formal setting, my genuine appreciation to the Representative Church Body – both the elected members and staff – for the great work they do. I want to thank them for their expertise, their professionalism, their wisdom, their generosity with their time and energy in providing support in so many important matters – particularly financial, legal and property-related. We are extremely fortunate to have such an impressive resource available to us.

If you were at the reception in the Guildhall last night, you will have been reminded that the very existence of the RB dates back to that great disruptive Irish Church Act of 1869, which caused Mrs Frances Alexander and many others so many anguished days and sleepless nights.

As the Venerable Archdeacon Stopford and The Lord Bishop Alexander of Derry and Raphoe reminded us so dramatically in the Guildhall, the Representative Body was formed soon after disestablishment and was given the onerous responsibility of holding and safeguarding the financial and property assets of the church. In 1870 the Representative Body became the charitable trustee for the parishes and dioceses of the island of Ireland.

In this significant anniversary year, it's worth reminding ourselves what the role of this 'charitable trustee of the Church of Ireland' was – and, indeed, what its role remains.

Back in 1870, the function of the RB was primarily to hold the title to church property and manage the state-provided general funds, as well as to administer the various parish and diocesan endowment trusts. Since then, though, its role has evolved considerably, with this year's Book of Reports describing it as an organization providing services to the wider church.

This service role will become even more important as the Church of Ireland looks to the next 50 years. Why do I say this? Because, as Mr Saville has noted, the statutory burden of compliance and the heavy demands of reporting are increasing all the time so that – without a central service to support us – we risk exhaustion and exasperation at 'reinventing the wheel' again and again at a parish and a diocesan level.

So what services is the RB now seeking to provide for parishes?

The RB's services have expanded to include not just investments, trusts and property management but also clergy stipend and pension payments, legal services, archives and library, and committee and synod services.

We note in this year's report that the list of services currently offered has now increased further with the addition of human resources advisory and data protection advisory. I use the word 'currently' deliberately for – if the RB is to support the mission of the church, and if it's to use its resources efficiently and remain effective in its mission – then it will need keep on adapting the services it provides and in all probability be willing to take on new roles.

But how can the Representative Body determine what services are needed?

I would suggest that RB staff should continue to do what they are already doing: engaging with and listening to – and maybe even visiting – rectors, Select Vestry members, diocesan secretaries and even bishops! We are all appreciative of the fact that, in recent years, RB staff have held seminars around the country providing pension advice, GDPR advice and Safeguarding advice. These initiatives have been much appreciated. By meeting with and listening to the needs of parishes, the RB is able to determine what services are most needed to reduce the burden that parishes are facing in relation to compliance, regulation and reporting.

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You might recall my efforts at last year's Synod in Armagh to highlight the heroic lengths which we were going to here in Derry and Raphoe to prepare for this year's General Synod. I can assure you no expense has been spared. We have left nothing on the pitch (to use a sporting metaphor). We've erected a Peace Bridge; we've designed and built a Guildhall and a Cathedral; we have constructed one mile of city walls and bulwarks; this Millennium Theatre was created – all with one specific objective in mind: the Church of Ireland General Synod in 2019!

Is it any wonder I've decided to retire from the church and take up a new role – presenter of the TV programme 'Extreme Makeover'?

Seriously, though, I want to use a biblical allusion to illustrate the relationship between the mission of the church and the service of the RB – with reference to city walls.

I don't mean the walls of Londonderry, I mean the walls of Jerusalem. And I'm not talking about the year 2019 but around 400 BC, in the reign of Nehemiah.

We recall that Nehemiah had been given permission by King Artaxerxes to go to the city of his fathers to rebuild the wall of the great city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was given crucial resources, including a letter to the governors of Trans-Euphrates securing safe passage, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest requesting timber.

But, important though the letters were, it wasn't really these resources which ultimately rebuilt the walls. The walls were rebuilt by people who were inspired by Nehemiah to work together co-operatively as a team. Nehemiah called them all together, and inspired them with a unifying vision. He told them about the gracious hand of God and the encouragement of the king. And they became fired up, they were motivated to achieve their mission by building 'side-by-side'. What we read is that each person and each group played their role in the mission, working "next to" or "alongside" the other, sharing a common purpose.

As I retire after 42 years in ordained ministry, I can confidently say that I have come to appreciate and value a growing unity of purpose between the RB and the Standing Committee.

I am struck by a more harmonious working "next to" or "alongside" each other, particularly in recent years, such that parishes and dioceses are being supported by a more cohesive sharing in God's mission in the church and in the world.

The days are fast going – perhaps they already have gone – when the RB was considered (mistakenly, no doubt, but considered nonetheless) to be somewhat remote and disconnected from the realities of parish life and missional outreach. Now, however, as parishes share the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed, the RB is recognized as seeking to support this mission by providing resources and advice.

So, as I move on, I am encouraged by a meaningful partnership in the gospel between the RB and the Standing Committee and the parishes and the diocese, all on the same page, working cohesively, and building on 150 years of shared history.

Archbishop, it gives me great pleasure to second the Report of the Representative Church Body for 2019.