

Church of Ireland Youth Department

Proposer: Mr Simon Henry

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As I stand before you today at Synod, I am acutely aware that for many across Ireland, within the Church of Ireland and in many other denominations and none, youth ministry is still recovering from the effects of the pandemic, as well as general congregational life. I know there is huge dedication in each and every diocese of youth ministry volunteers, clergy and if you are blessed to have them, paid youth ministry staff. Thank you!

From that starting point I really sincerely want to thank the tremendous hard work and dedication of my CIYD colleagues Steve Grasham and Barbara Swann – they have both had a lot going on outside the workplace this year and yet they have never wavered in their dedication to CIYD and to youth ministry – and they work very hard to keep me right, a hard job as Bishop Pat knows full well.

I do want to thank our President Bishop Pat and Chairperson Brigid Barrett – two forces of nature in their own right who dedicate so much time for the flourishing of youth ministry on this island, all done with huge amounts of passion, honesty and enthusiasm.

To all the members of our Executive Committee and Central Board who are always helpful, and who have gone beyond the call of duty to help facilitate the work of CIYD across Ireland and who are always very supportive. We are very grateful for the funding that comes in from Allocations Committee, the Irish Government and recently the Education Authority (Northern Ireland) and we are certain that we are using the resources as wisely as possible.

The mission of the Church of Ireland Youth Department is to work with our dioceses, parishes and others in partnership to see young people come to faith and be disciplined into the church. We want to equip, empower and engage, and to see young people become disciples and for them to make disciples.

Culture and society are racing ahead of us at breakneck speed and young people are exhausted.

And yet what does Jesus say?

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

The fast rise of expressive individualism for Generation Z and Generation Alpha encourages young people to make themselves morally authoritative, create their own identity, declare it to the world and to find their tribe. Make no mistake – there has been a dramatic shift in youth

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ministry, in young people themselves, in their culture, and of course the Church itself. Empty pithy phrases like “you do you,” “your truth / my truth,” “follow your heart,” are the prevailing conversational norms of the day, lest we upset anyone with objective Gospel truth.

Young people are bombarded with ideas and notions that the highest good is individual freedom, self-definition and self-expression. All thoroughly unbiblical ideas. What did Jesus himself say? “No-one is good but God alone.” (Mark 10:18)

Where does all this lead young people? We see it all around us – disorientation, isolation, and exhaustion.

We must talk to our children and young people about what it means to be made in the image of God for a purpose, to actively seek to form a Christian worldview within them, and teach and model that true joy comes from a life dedicated to following Jesus – picking up our cross and following him.

Parishes and dioceses need to think carefully about how to better equip and train parents in the vital role they play in raising faithful Christian young people – a task that cannot be left just to Youth Fellowship leaders or Sunday School teachers.

There have been recent brutal cuts to the entire youth work sector, faith based and secular, in Northern Ireland recently, which has impacted the lives of young people and the disappearance of some face to face vital youth ministry.

The Church and its leaders must respond to this – as well as us as individual followers of Jesus, as members of our local parish, and wider as members of the Church of Ireland. Our job is to pass on the faith we have – youth ministry needs continual advocacy, diocesan support and of course, financial investment. As a Church nationally, as dioceses, we need much, much more strategic financial investment in youth ministry and youth workers, something I’ll never tire of saying.

We would love our budget to increase at CIYD to do more and we would also love to see more local investment in parish and diocesan youth ministry too. House of Bishops, Allocations Committee members, and all those with influence, please hear my plea kindly.

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We recently had our National Youth Forum was attended by young people and youth leaders from almost every diocese and we were grateful that we had Bishop Michael with us to be part of the event, with our focus on mental health and faith – a huge issue for young people.

We received our most overwhelmingly positive feedback yet from those who attend and as we gathered up those feedback forms at the end of the day one caught our eye – it said: “Thank you for today for helping me feel less alone” – at that point of course I had to find a tissue, but my goodness, that has had such an impact on us and helps us see the value in bringing young people of faith together to debate, discuss, be challenged and grow.

I, on behalf of CIYD, on behalf of the young people we engaged with at the Youth Forum, am asking you as bishops, clergy, leaders and influencers in your parish and dioceses to get behind young people and give them more opportunities within your parish and your diocese, as we pray they will be sitting where you are sitting today in a number of years’ time.

Our hugely successful Young Leaders in Ministry Fund has seen its biggest response ever within the past 12 months – it exists to support young people taking part in training and development courses, mission teams, leadership opportunities and placements that will develop their Christian faith and encourage them to be of use to the Church of Ireland in the future.

We are delighted to be launching later this year, with huge thanks to the Priorities Fund, a natural successor to the Young Leaders in Ministry Fund, entitled Next Steps. And it does what it says on the tin!

There is anecdotal evidence that CIYD is familiar with, from across universities on the island of Ireland and also our denominational colleagues, indicating that vocational training uptake such as theological and/or youth ministry courses, has significantly reduced as an impact of the pandemic.

With Next Steps we aim to significantly encourage the number of young people and current youth leaders to undertake third level professional qualifications and development within the wider youth ministry sector, the impact of which would benefit ministry in the Church of Ireland.

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This fund would provide individuals with significant bursaries to encourage them in their application for relevant third level undergraduate and post graduate courses in relation to youth ministry, that might otherwise have been financially challenging. We are excited about the potential of this!

As I conclude I want to say as a reminder to us all, it is vital that we do everything we can to direct young people towards God and to help them develop their faith and provide opportunities, and not barriers.

I commend this report to you today and ask for you to kindly receive it.