

Commission on Ministry

Secunder: The Very Revd Nigel Crossey

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I am very happy to second the Report of the Commission on Ministry (to be found on pages 333 to 336 of the Book of Reports).

I have only very recently come to membership of the Commission, but I was immediately struck by the range of issues which a Commission on Ministry might be called upon to address. I suppose that is inevitable given that the term ministry, along with mission, encompasses almost every aspect of church life. And even just a cursory glance at the report gives an indication of the Commission's work.

There is of course therefore a danger – what we might call mission creep. The danger that in trying to cover too many aspects we might not be able to cover anything adequately. A case of too little butter spread on too much bread. The Chair of the Commission, Bishop McClay, was determined that we should maintain effectiveness. So the Commission undertook a bit of a scoping exercise informed by a comprehensive mapping document prepared by Archdeacon Forde – having identified those areas in which the Commission was involved, interested or concerned, we sought to give priority to those issues which we thought were the most important. The report which you see before you is really the outworking of that scoping exercise.

We are of course grateful to Bishop McClay for his chairmanship and also to our secretaries, Dr Catherine Smith and Dr Nicole Gallagher, for their administrative support.

There is no doubt that we are, in terms of ministry, undergoing a period of much and profound change. And change is never entirely comfortable. I think it was Woodrow Wilson who said that if you want to make enemies, try to change something, for to do things today exactly the way you did them yesterday saves any bother. As someone else said, we live in a moment of history where change is so speeded up that we begin to see the present only when it has already disappeared.

So change is upon us – whether its coming from outside the Church (social and cultural, regulatory or legislative) or from inside the Church (financial, structural, pastoral). But it is also possible that change is upon us from the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

The report from the Commission on Ministry highlights some, but only some, of the issues which seem to us to be most pressing in this atmosphere of change.

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We are seeing the development of different, alternative, innovative approaches to the exercise of ministry. I am thinking particularly of the part-time stipendiary ministry, shared ministry, lay pastors, lay readers, Ordained Local Ministry, and Pioneer Ministry which is mentioned on page 334. These are practical responses to a wealth of opportunity, and isn't it fantastic that in the life of the Church we are seeing people answer God's call in these diverse and wonderful ways. It is so important that we encourage and foster and nurture the whole spectrum of vocation through retreats and through prayer, especially specific times of prayer set aside in the Church to ask God to call forth.

But you will forgive me – I'm forty years ordained next year (along with his honour the Bishop of Cork) and I can't help being reflective. I wonder what I would say to my 24 year old self - at that time 40 years ago still in residential, formation training. I wonder what I would say to him about full-time, full-service stipendiary ordained ministry, about to give himself to a whole-of-life vocation to the service of God and of God's people in the ordained ministry. Surely I should be able to say that that is something that the Church values and prizes and affirms and treasures and cherishes – and protects.

We really do not have to look too far to see that there are particular stresses and strains and pressures on those in ministry positions. As a Commission, we have sought to draw attention to just some of them. We began to look at rural ministry and the particular support needed there. We have applauded and welcomed the packages to support clergy well-being – and may I commend to Synod the idea of every diocese having a clear policy on sabbatical leave and perhaps also on annual retreats, mid-career courses, continuous professional development etc. What a difference it would make if these professional expectations were standardised across our Church! – not just permitted but promoted.

We have, I believe, to acknowledge that the burden of regulatory and legislative compliance, which we highlight on page 333, is one which has become intolerable for many – the bane and dismay of the clergy and the discouragement and bewilderment of the laity. Now, I realise that the Churches are in a delicate situation with regard to the powers-that-be but it is frankly almost as though we were in some kind of an abusive relationship. And in an abusive relationship the word 'no' has power. Do we have the courage, the trust, the faith to say 'no'? – to say that what

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is being asked of us is unfair, unacceptable, unreasonable, unworkable? I hope we do, because I believe we need to do so to preserve ministry as something other than administration.

I am happy to second the report of the Commission on Ministry.