

Rev. Gamble's Report to the General Vestry Meeting on 6th April 2018

This evening's report will be somewhat different from its predecessors as there are a number of matters which have come before the Select Vestry in the past year which have not been of serious concern until now, and which I will introduce to you tonight.

The first is a matter of organisation. Churches are quite rightly being brought within a wider charitable status by new regulations which I personally believe are in the long-term good of society. You will have become aware of administrative abuses in some charities, such as directors paying themselves salaries and expenses which are very hard to justify and which have been concealed by poor accounting practices. Rest assured that we have not discovered such in our accounts or practices, but it has led to all charities being looked at in a new light. Where previously the Church of Ireland was a charity, but the need for full accountancy was restricted to RCB accounts, or to the accounts of individual dioceses, now individual parishes have their own charity numbers and will be potentially answerable to the Charity Commissioners. There are carrots as well as sticks and it appears that an exemption will be made in accounting standards at an income level which has not yet been officially agreed. However, from figures being suggested, the Select Vestry are planning that we may have to allow for a higher standard than the basic.

We also have to comply with other legislation passed in data protection and health & safety issues. The Treasurer, Secretary and Claire Craig, who has been appointed as Data Protection Person, attended a seminar recently organised by the RCB, where it became evident that a basic ability in computer skills is now essential for all officers of the Select Vestry. Increasingly correspondence from official sources and indeed from the RCB, will be digital and must be dealt with in this medium. We will also be examining our use of data records, such as information held by the Parish to ensure that it is held in accordance with legislation. The importance of personal security and privacy is very important and desirable, and includes our use of social media. We will be reviewing this as a matter of urgency as the legislation, which is already enacted, comes into force shortly.

This is not the type of thing that used to take up the time of Select Vestries not that many years ago but it is an essential part of the responsibilities on the shoulders of a Select Vestry. It is not simply bureaucracy loading extra burdens on unfortunate volunteers.

Compliance gives us the protection of the law which is a matter of considerable importance, and which we have not had to date. It comes at a cost but one which I believe is worth paying: no longer can Select Vestries be amateurish in their ways, and it is vital to have people in post who are capable of operating in a far more technical environment than in the past. Computer skills are now of the utmost importance as most correspondence now comes by email, both from the RCB and Government bodies.

The second matter is one which has arisen in the last couple of years, and that is developments in the physical structure of our parish. Literally thousands of dwellings are to be built in an area stretching from the Clayton Hotel to Clongriffin Station. How do we respond to this? The Select Vestry have responded with enthusiasm but will need the support of all of you in accepting changes over the next number of years.

There are a number of issues which arise and where action is already been taken. The question is what is needed to attract people into St Doulagh's not as visitors but as members of the congregation. We must avoid simply marketing St Doulagh's as a historical building, as has been the case until now.

This does not mean that tours cease, or that we cease attracting and fostering passers-by and tourists, but I am not aware in 28 years of anyone who has joined the congregation because of the age of the building. I am aware of people joining us when they get a warm, loving welcome and a sense of God's presence. I am also aware that most people passing by are keeping their eyes on the winding road, hence the new board simply inviting people to come on a Sunday at 10am and all are welcome. One couple who have joined us, who

live and work in the area, did not know we are there, because when they went for a walk they tended to head for Fr Collins Park but when they did walk by they had to look hard to realise that this was their Church and their tradition. How many more are there? Newcomers who come into the area must find a genuine welcome, not be grunted at and have a prayer book pushed into their hands. I remember visiting the Anglican chaplaincy in Berlin, some miles out in Spandau, and being generally ignored in such a manner that we did not want to go back if we revisited Berlin. We were intruders in a club. On the other hand we received such a warm welcome in Budapest that I now help out there on an annual basis.

It is also important that first time visitors must also find worship in contemporary language, not in 17th century English. The Church must be relevant to today, its concerns and its needs. What we are doing is gradually developing St Doulagh's as a focal point for newcomers to the area who are looking for a spiritual centre. We will not and cannot hide its failings, such as the winter cold or the lack of facilities for Sunday School and congregational activities. Until we can do something about them, that is part of the adventure! We are at the beginning of a long-term project which involves making contact with new residents, and possibly looking for somewhere to meet in the Clongriffin area which is some two miles from St Doulagh's. I know one thing: we cannot rely on people finding us.

We have something to offer in the quiet reflective worship of Anglicanism which lies at the basis of the Church of Ireland today. We need to avoid trendiness and concentrate on prayerful preaching and personal living out of God's love, power and presence, and I am absolutely certain that we can do this. What we cannot do is what is the bane of many Church of Ireland communities: staying in the past as a club which views the newcomer with suspicion as a 'blow-in'. I stress that this is a long term vision. Perhaps before I pass on, I will be invited back to see the vision's fruition, a new parish of the Northern Fringe working as part of a greater Christian witness in that area. Many of our parish family have come to us from spiritual traditions outside Anglicanism. The Select Vestry are working towards a new future for St Doulagh's for which it has been waiting since it was built in its present form over 150 years ago, and as a sign of a new age and attitude. These ideas have been shared with the Catholic Parish of Donaghmede with whom we share territory east of Belmayne.

I would pay tribute in this regard to those involved at the coal face who have put a great deal of work into our vision for St Doulagh's, to Ian Watkins and Jonathan Stokes and to members of the congregation who are introducing themselves to visitors and making them feel at home.

Fundraising of course remains a necessity. I thank Hazel Bolton, Emer Bryan and their many helpers for the work undertaken with the Christmas Market, which was very successful this year, and Richard Firth for the work he undertakes in organising the now annual Run/Walk for homeless charities, for the Alice Leahy and Peter McVerry trusts, and Ian Watkins who has taken over the running of Car Boot sales for St Doulagh's restoration and development. I also wish to thank Ken McAllister who has looked after approaches for grants for St Doulagh's from outside sources, a process which has involved much time consuming technical work I would mention that most of these grants must be matched by direct fund-raising into the parish accounts. That means that we double donations passed on to the Select Vestry by groups such as the Friends of St Doulagh's who are not eligible for these grants, such as the money raised by the 'Buy a Slate' Appeal.

Our churchwardens and lay readers have undertaken much visible work during the year, and I would offer our sympathy and prayers to Ethel Leech, who has been prevented by serious ill health by being active for much of the year. Ethel is awaiting surgery which we hope will be successful and we look forward to her return in good form in the not too distant future.

I also thank our lay reader, Victor Black for all that he has given to the parish for quite a number of years: I say this because circumstances arose through which he resigned for personal reasons, and his involvement at the St Doulagh's end will be missed. However, our team of lay readers has been strengthened by the addition early this year of Dr Tom Healy, a former parishioner who moved a few years back to Skerries. First coming to us for training, Tom has been permanently assigned to us and we are benefiting greatly from his experience, his learning and his spirituality. David Rea has also been very active during the year, and I greatly value his interest in the ministry of healing. Life has not been easy over the years for either of them, but both preach from their personal experience of God's love even in times of weakness.

I would also thank those whose work is unseen. Our Parish Administrator, Anne Taplin, has suffered serious ill-health but has continued her work from behind the scenes: indeed some of us have not yet realised that she has not been in the office since the summer as letters and emails are answered promptly. Thankfully she is making a good recovery and should be back at the desk in the not too distant future. I thank Ian Watkins and Ian Hyland for their care of the parish centre. Ian is also our glebeward and the time he gives from a busy life to care for our buildings with love and skill is absolutely amazing. Brian Brown as Hon Treasurer is backed up by a strong team, including Robert Barker who is in charge of the Envelope scheme which generates a very considerable income in tax rebates, without which we would be in a far worse financial position than we are, and I also add to that John Haynes and the other members of the Finance Committee, and also Alan Jones, Claire Craig, Howard Duncan and Adele Notley who work behind the scenes in communications and social media presence. We must have members of the Select Vestry who have the skills we need. In recent years the Select Vestry has been slowly reorganised so that its members use their personal gifts and feed back into our thinking from the various committees. This has been very successful and our future lies in great part in this process which has greatly increased the efficiency of our deliberations. Hazel Bolton as Hon Secretary also deserves our thanks as she also manages to keep me on the straight and narrow from time to time, and marks out many events in our calendar for recognition at the monthly coffee morning. Claire Craig came on the vestry last year, and has made her mark! Working in the communications industry, Claire has been given the task of looking after data protection which I have already mentioned.

Victor Black was chairing the Ecumenical Committee which organises the Wednesday evening Lenten meetings and his work there, along with Susan Gamble, should be mentioned, especially as the meetings this year were badly disrupted: one meeting was snowed off, and two speakers were unable to come for health reasons. The foul weather meant that attendances were down but I have better hopes for next year!