

CAI AGM 20 September 2025

Remarks from the Acting Chair

Before I make some more general observations, I should give a round-up of the activities of the CAI Committee over the past year. Following the AGM on 30th June 2024, whose minutes have been circulated, the Committee met to prepare for the analysis of CAI media and social media activities undertaken by Dr Lucy Michael, the newly appointed Publicity and Social Media Officer. You will see that Lucy's efforts for CAI over the course of the year have been considerable and invaluable – we are deeply indebted to her continuing professionalism, diligence and dedication in serving CAI.

In February, I assumed the role of interim Chairperson to free Mark for other responsibilities – his term as Chair has been marked by significant progress not least the three diocesan synod votes and he continues to be a greatly valued member of the committee, and whose friendship we all prize. I continue to use the title 'interim chair' as my role was not subject to an AGM vote – something that can be discussed at the 2025 AGM.

On April 6th the committee met at a hotel in Tullamore to undertake a strategic review of our activities, successes and challenges, and the broader church and societal environment. The day was facilitated by Dr Lucy Michael, who has great experience in this area, and she undertook to edit the substantial notes from the 'brainstorm' into a coherent strategy document. This was discussed, revised and agreed by the committee at our Sept meeting for presentation at the 2025 AGM (item 8 on the agenda).

General Synod was held at Lawlor's Hotel in Naas from May 8th to 10th and this year we had a stall. Thanks go to all members of the Committee who volunteered to run the stall, not least Mark who was indefatigable. We very much hope that we can secure a stall for future General Synods as many important conversations circulated around the table; we have more friends than sometimes we know. As usual we also hosted a lunchtime talk, given this time by Revd Katherine Meyer. Without bitterness or personal condemnation she detailed her experience of intolerance within her own church community, and sought to inspire us all to stand firm in the face of prejudice and intimidation – she is a courageous example to us all.

We are deeply grateful, first of all, to the Very Revd Dermot Dunne, Dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin for agreeing to host, yet again, the annual Pride service, and a reception that followed the service, hosting a supper for the preacher and others, and also hosting the community workshop held the next day, also in the Cathedral. The preacher and leader of the workshop, of course, was the Rt Revd Dr Bonnie Perry, Bishop of Michigan in the Episcopal Church (USA); a tireless and veteran campaigner for a variety of social issues including LGBTQIA+ rights and gun violence and control.

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I am delighted to confirm that she also consented to become an overseas patron of CAI; she certainly was an inspirational preacher and a warm and engaging presence among us, we look forward to her continuing contribution to our work, and must express our gratitude for her commitment and friendship.

At times when we are tempted to become downhearted it is good to reflect on those of courage and integrity who are among us and support us.

Also in June we added, Jacqui Dickson and Steven McQuitty as co-opted members of the committee; we should also thank all those from CAI who marched in Belfast Pride as part of the 'Christians at Pride' group.

So, on behalf of the committee we hope you will read the Strategic Plan 2025-2028 with interest; it contains some ambitious, but we hope realistic aspirations. However, the Committee is small in number, and we each have several other commitments both voluntary and professional to maintain, and so this is a heartfelt appeal to all members of CAI to do whatever they can to help in the advancement of our cause. As the committee we commit to improving our communication with the membership so that you can see not only our work, but also how you might make your own contribution towards the vision for which we all strive - to promote love, understanding, and justice for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, particularly within the Church of Ireland.

And we need to find common cause with all church groups, and beyond, who so dearly want to see a church which truly shares the love of Christ with all, without barrier, without boundary, without limitation. For we need to be honest with ourselves, that despite the laudable and sometimes dramatic strides forward that have been taken in this land and within our church, there are still some, seemingly, implacable and intractable voices and votes still raised against us. We know that the whole swathes of the Church of Ireland support the cause of equality now, and have and would vote accordingly, but as we saw with the bitter rancour directed towards the visit of Bishop Bonnie, from some senior and institutional sources, parts of our island church hold views that continue to be a source of great pain and victimization of groups and individuals.

We might wonder how such 'conservative' voices square this with their consciences, but the truth is that they continue to believe themselves to be faithful and compassionate people, because the objects of their ire, are in their view members of 'out-groups' to whom the demands of mercy and justice simply do not apply; and they can continue in this way because they see these 'others' not as people, with families and feelings and hopes and dreams, but only in the abstract, as a group, as a culture or a 'lifestyle' to be condemned.

So, whilst we may have important strategies to guide us, and plans to enact, the bottom line is this, we need to make it clear that we are simply caring, loving faithful and gentle people, deserving of simple kindness, consideration and fairness. We are

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not trying to upend the world, or disturb the devotion of others who also shelter in the nave, the 'ship' of the church, but simply asking that they shuffle along a little, to give everyone some room.

Canon Kevin O'Brien