Diocesan Synod Speech 2024

Members of Synod,

We come to this familiar place to conduct the business of our Dioceses; we gather as a diocesan family. Like the early church in the book of Acts, we are all together in the one place - the ecclesia, the assembly of the people of God, the Church of Christ, in this part of our shared island. We come in gratitude to God that we can join together in peace and prosperity. This is a luxury that many of our brothers and sisters across the world do not enjoy. We remember especially Christians who live in the killing fields of the world, particularly those in the biblical lands of Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, and Persia or Iran. We commit ourselves to pray for their safety and survival. We also pledge to support them in practical ways through agencies such as Bishops Appeal. As we come together, we are joined by friends and guests from other churches and Christian agencies. We bid them welcome. I will ask your permission in due course for some of our guests to address us.

We have just returned from Saint George’s Church where we gathered around God’s word and the Lord’s table. The theme of my Synod sermon was *Service*. Service was a hallmark of the early church in the book of Acts. It is our template for church life. I am acutely aware of how so many people serve in our parishes in a multitude of ways. They serve their families, neighbours and community. Service is an attitude, a disposition to help out and to help others. It is of the essence of Christ who, as Mark put it in his Gospel, came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. And so, in particular, I want to thank you for representing your parishes and organisations at this Synod. We are also indebted to those who serve in diocesan administration:

* to Sarah Taylor and Ann Smith in the office
* to Dr Rita Day in Glebes
* to our honorary secretary and honorary treasurers.
* to our three archdeacons: Patrick Bamber, Hazel Hicks and Ian Horner.

We commend all those who serve on the Diocesan Council, Finance and Glebes, the Safeguarding Team and YKEA. There are countless people who serve their local parishes as church wardens, glebe wardens, secretaries, treasurers and select vestry members. In an age when fewer and fewer people commit to voluntary service, we acknowledge the service of so many people, who make our parishes and Dioceses work.

Since we last met, a number of our clergy have celebrated special occasions, retired or relocated. Earlier this year, our two Deans, Arfon Williams and Nigel Crossey, each marked 40 years of ordained ministry. While Dean Nigel continues to minister in Kilmore Cathedral, Dean Arfon retired at the end of summer. Canon Mark Lidwill retired having served as Rector of the Cavan group of parishes for 34 years. What extraordinary stamina. We give thanks to the Lord of the Church for these marathon ministry men. For health reasons, Canon Linda Frost also stepped aside from active ministry in the Mohill group. Two other clergy, the Reverend Nick Jones and the Reverend Alastair Donaldson left parish ministry in our Dioceses. It is always a matter of sadness and regret when we lose clergy and so to all of these servants of God, we are grateful for their ministry in the past and pray that the Lord will bless them in the days ahead.

As a Dioceses, we celebrate the ordination of our two curates: the Reverend Luke Pratt and the Reverend Sam Pellow as presbyters or priests. We also rejoice in the ordination of the Reverend Faith Sithole as ordained Deacon. We have four ordinands at various stages of training: Joshua Pringle, Gail McNeil, Edward Lindsay and John Young. We want to thank our Director of Ordinands, Archdeacon Ian Horner, for his ministry of encouragement and support for those discerning the call of God on their lives. We pray to the Lord of the harvest to call and send more labourers into his harvest field.

Currently, across the Church of Ireland, there are around 90 vacant parishes and six of those are in our Dioceses. One of our parish groups, Virginia, which was vacant for about 18 months, recently welcomed the Reverend Ian Berry as their new Rector. Ian is with us today; you are very welcome indeed. The Diocesan Council has set in train a process of engagement with our vacant parishes, in order to prepare them in due course to attract new leaders.

During vacancies, we are highly dependent on the team of active retired clergy, Diocesan lay readers and parish readers. I commend their work to you. We welcome the Reverend Guy Chave-Cox to our active retired clergy ranks. This year, I have commissioned two new parish readers: David McConnell and Simon Webster. I am delighted that the Reverend Ian Berry has accepted responsibility as Warden of Readers to train and prepare our growing reader team.

The world that we live in holds many people who have no or little connection with church. The Church of Ireland has established a Pioneer Ministry initiative to connect with such people. At the moment we have a new church community in Sligo, Recentre, which is part of the Sligo Cathedral group. It is reaching a demographic that traditional church is not able to. As a Dioceses, we want to explore the possibility of creating new church communities as part of this initiative. Later we will hear from the Director of the Pioneer Ministry initiative.

This year I would like to draw Synod’s attention to those who serve in our schools, not only the national sector but also secondary, in particular the Royal School Cavan led by Mr Padraic Corley, Sligo Grammar School whose principal is Mr Michael Hall and Wilson’s Hospital School currently led by Mr John Galligan, Acting Principal. We are grateful that these schools are staffed by dedicated teachers. Once again, this year their students have excelled not only academically but on the sports field and artistic arena. The governance of these schools is only made possible by the availability of committed people to serve on Boards of Management and Boards of Directors. I want to thank those who serve in these capacities.

Likewise, national schools are well served by the Principals, Teachers and their support staff. Our schools work under considerable financial constraints. Successive governments seem to be preoccupied with style and not substance. Until the capitation grant given for each pupil or student is raised to a more realistic level, national and secondary schools will struggle to balance the books. Nonetheless, one of the joys of my ministry is to visit our national schools. I always come away with a sense of elation and gratitude. Boards of Management of national schools for the next three years have been well established. We had a very successful buy-in for Board of Management training earlier this year. I also wish to commend the work of the Diocesan Board of Education which facilitates input into the national schools.

However, I want to alert Synod to a proposed policy change which is going to come down the line. It relates to the governance of national schools. The government is hoping to ensure that churches divest patronage of their schools to other non-church patronage bodies, for example, Educate Together and the Education and Training Board. To that end, the government intends for a national survey of parents and staff to take place, to ascertain attitudes to patronage. As a church we need to make a positive case for the continuation of the patronage of our local national schools. I have no doubt that we should be involved in the education of children and young people. Our schools are happy places of learning and Christian formation where children are valued and cared for by teachers and leaders. We are privileged to have access to national and secondary schools but we should not take anything for granted. As we say in the Church of Ireland, ‘We do not presume’.

One of the most rewarding elements of our engagement with schools is Youth Alpha. The Alpha course is a well-known Christian exploration course. Youth Alpha gives young people space to have meaningful conversations about life, faith and purpose. It has been created to engage young people in the exploration of the core ideas of the Christian faith in a relevant, accessible and enjoyable manner. The course is presented as a film series with time for discussion that allows teenagers to have fun and to ask some of life’s most important questions. In partnership with the Roman Catholic Dioceses of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise and Elphin, in conjunction with Youth for Christ, we participate in Youth Alpha which is delivered as part of the Transition Year Programme in secondary schools in Longford and Sligo. I commend the work of the Sligo Centre of Mission, Alan Williamson, Hannah O’Neill, Keanna Salas Reverend Simon and Tam Scott, Reverend Christiaan and Karen Snell and Marion Edwards who help deliver Youth Alpha to Transition Year students in their localities.

In conclusion as we make a start to conduct the business of Synod to receive reports, adopt accounts, consider motions, elect and make appointments, can I remind us of what the church is for. Throughout the ages, God has called people to himself for at least three reasons:

* First, worship. We the church exist to declare the praises of God, to reflect to God, his own glory. And we offer worship to Almighty God in the knowledge that an increasing number of people do not take Him into consideration at all. In our worship we need to keep focus on the Lord Jesus. He is the object of our worship. Worship not because God needs it, we need it. If we keep the worship of Christ as a focus, we need not be anxious about the survival of the church. We are not in panic mode about survival. The church is most alive when it places the worship of the Lord above its own survival.
* Secondly, the church exists for witness. How do we bear witness to Christ? It starts in our homes. We worship God – giving thanks for our daily food, in praying with and for our children, enjoying quiet times of Bible reading, in sharing acts of compassion with our family and neighbours, praying for them and helping them. Our witness works out from our homes to our neighbours, through our church and communities to the wider world. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news after all and we are there to share it. The world around us is so full of bad and sad news. God the Holy Spirit needs to convince us about witness, because people who are not convinced about the good news, will convince nobody.
* Finally, the church also exists for wisdom. In the Bible, wisdom is distinct from knowledge. We live in a world of instant knowledge and communication - and yet our world is full of folly. The fear of the Lord, of acknowledging God, is the beginning of wisdom. We seek and promote wisdom in order to live wisely. How our land and our world needs wisdom. We exist to live and offer the wisdom of God to our lost and foolish generation.

I pray that as we begin our business, in all our discussions and decisions, God the Father will be glorified, God the Son will be honoured and we will keep in step with God the Holy Spirit.