**Presidential Address by the Rt Rev Alan Abernethy, Bishop of Connor**

**Connor Diocesan Synod – Wednesday September 28th 2016**

It was a special moment and was full of memories which brought laughter and tears. Remembering the past is always an important moment but it must always be a way of recognising the present and looking to the future. It was my Auntie Dora's 90th birthday during this past week and she is such a special lady and an important influence in my life. She is the only remaining sibling from four childrenof which my mum was the eldest - in fact my mum would have been 100 this year.

One of the facets I have always admired about my dear Auntie Dora is her ability to be thankful for the past, to remember but to also recognise the joy of the present and that the future always beckons. Sitting in pride of place at her birthday lunch were her four granddaughters, and she was in her element as they remembered funny moments in their childhoods, but also as young adults shared their achievements and their dreams. This three dimensional remembering is so important on our journey of faith in Christ.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and forever. There are many examples in the Hebrew Scriptures not least in the Psalms of how the children of Israel found courage and strength from remembering God's mercy and unfailing love in past experience. However, it did not stop them from making mistakes in the present or grumbling when things were difficult. My favourite moment is when they reached the verge of the promised land having been released from slavery when they wanted to go back rather than face the uncertainty of the future. On this journey of faith we must always be moving forward remembering the blessings of the past and experiencing God's presence with us in the present moment which is promised by our Lord who says he will be with us always.

On a personal note I am so grateful for your prayers and support as I have entered my tenth year as your bishop. The journey has had its difficult challenges and also moments of great blessing. Above all I am very grateful for the grace and strength to serve you as I seek to lead you into the future, conscious of so many blessings in the past and issues to be addressed in the present to help shape the future.

Within the diocese there have been many parishes facing change with various clergy moves and retirements. We have been able to welcome some new clergy to the diocesan team. There has also been an increasing number of part-time ministry posts and some new options for ministry. I am increasingly convinced that groups and unions are not the way forward in terms of reshaping parish life, we need to find new models of ministry and parish. The issue that concerns me most is the isolation and loneliness that can be the lot of parish clergy. I do want to find ways of making parish ministry something that can be done as team with limited resources.

Within the administration of the two dioceses of Down and Dromore and Connor, there has been a process of restructuring. This is a journey that began many months ago with a major review of diocesan administration in both Down and Dromore and Connor. This has been difficult for staff, the staff committee representing the joint committee and the bishops. There has been a formal process and this has been carefully guided by our diocesan solicitor and expert human resource support. The outcome will be that by early next year each diocese will have its own administrative structure and staff, working directly to the diocesan bishop. These new support structures will:

• Allow each diocese to develop its own priorities and to respond quickly to changing circumstances and issues that arise;

• Enable clear lines of responsibility and clarity around management and avoid compacted and time consuming decision making;

• Integrate mission, ministry and support for parishes;

• Ensure better stewardship of limited resources and reduce the financial impact on parishes;

• It will help create a clear focus and identity for each diocese.

I am grateful to all who have helped us in this difficult process, not least the diocesan staff who have engaged in this process and have helped us look to the future. The journey is ongoing and within the next month it will be clearer how things are going to be in the new structures.

When the process is finished I will be writing to all parishes to explain the new structure and what roles all staff will be fulfilling. Change is never easy but I do believe this will help us as a diocese as we look to the future.

It has also been exciting to see our diocesan Centre of Mission established and Karen and Stephen now have a base in the Spectrum Centre on the Shankill Road. The local clergy have been helpful in their comments and questions, and they have been appreciative of Karen and Stephen and we are very grateful for the funding we have received for some new ways of being missional. This will be a great asset to the local churches but also in time to the wider diocese as we develop new ways of connecting with people and local communities who have little or no church connection. This can become a resource for equipping, training and modelling for us in mission today. Please do visit them and pray for them as we seek to develop some new initiatives. I am convinced that alongside traditional church we need to find ways of connecting with people who are not going to come to church and we have to be willing to take risks to do so. The past is something we can celebrate as God has blessed us but the future is certainly calling us to see traditional church done well and to discover new ways of being church and of rediscovering the importance of community and belonging.

The diocesan vision strategy has helped many focus on some important issues that we are facing as church in the local parish setting. How do we connect with each local community who for many the church is no longer of any relevance? How do we ensure that ministry is something that we all exercise through our baptism and discipleship? How do manage change when change is extremely difficult. However I believe it is an exciting lime to be involved in Christ's Church as we have to be more flexible, creative and discover where the Spirit of God is at work and join in.

Within our local community there is still a real difficulty in dealing with the past and so often the past can hinder us from moving forward. I do believe that the legacy of the past is something we cannot avoid as we seek to build a better future. It will need courage, grace and wisdom but we must find ways of living with the past that can honour all and recognise deep and unresolved pain. We do need our political leaders to help find ways of facing the legacy of the past. The news last weekend was an important moment for one local community as there has been an agreed resolution regarding the impasse at Twadell Avenue. Bishop Noel Treanor and I have already issued a joint statement commending those who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to bring this situation to a resolution. We do pray that this Saturday will be something that helps us move to a better tomorrow. Please pray for all who strive towards peace and a shared future in the area.

It is with sadness that I will be unable to travel to our link diocese in Yel in South Sudan in January. Bishop Hilary and Mama Joyce have had a very difficult number of months and their own personal safety has been at risk.\*\*\* The violence is raging and yet again human life has been lost and communities devastated. Please pray for this country as it seeks to find a better future from some tragic and painful hurts of the past that keep coming back to destroy hope and peace. We will send our greetings to them from this synod and assure them of our continued prayers and friendship in Jesus.

My experience as a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches has been a challenge and a helpful perspective on our own situation. I hear stories of Pacific islands disappearing because of the change in sea levels, stories of awful humanitarian crisis in Syria, the continuing violence in Palestine and the tragic accounts of how children have been caught up in situations of violence and war. I find myself struggling with the reality of human suffering and how we have much to do as the people of God to work and pray for peace.

One of the results of my recent Central Committee meeting is that I have been challenged to reflect again on the issue of the environment and how we are stewards of God's creation. At this early to stage of planning I am considering making this the subject of next year’s Lent Course. I do enjoy the opportunity to leach in the three archdeaconries and to be able to discuss important biblical

themes. This year the subject of grace challenged me as we as the Church of Christ should be grace dispensers following his example in life and death.

Finally my thanks to many people.

To all of you for your prayers and encouragement, ministry is something we do together and I could not do what I do without your support.

To those clergy who have retired this year, Dean John Bond, Canon Gorge Irwin, Canon Ken McReynolds, The Rev Paul Redfern and Canon Neil Cutcliffe who retires this week. Robert Kay also retired from serving as a Lay Hon Secretary and from other central church committees, last year we recognised his 30 years’ service in this post.

I have also recorded our thanks to someone who gave so much to this diocese and the wider church, the Rev Canon Edgar Turner.

To all staff in the diocesan administration and accounts, particularly in this uncertain and difficult time of transition. To Trevor Douglas and the Development Team, Jill, Christina, Karen Webb and Stephen, their energy and enthusiasm is seeing many parishes supported. To Karen Bushby not least for an excellent job on our website.

To the one known as the boss, Rosemary Patterson, She does not just look after my diary or my work, she looks after me and that is not easy.

To my family, now known as the sensational six with the addition of Rosanna and Matthew, to Liz, Peter and Ruth. Family are a special gift and I am incredibly grateful for their love.

As we journey to the future, thankful for the past, seeking to celebrate the present moment, I am very thankful that we journey with the one who is with us always.

Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*\*\*Bishop Alan added that he had heard only that day that Bishop Hilary and Mama Joyce have had to leave Yei and move to Arua due to the deteriorating situation in the town.