**Presidential Address to Connor Diocesan Synod by the Rt Rev Alan Abernethy,
Bishop of Connor. October 3rd 2018**

It was wonderful to have the gift of a sabbatical - time to recover from the constant demands of ministry and leadership. I am very grateful to the three wise men, the archdeacons, for sharing the load and ensuring matters were dealt with; they kept the diocese in good heart.

Thanks also to team Connor for working for the good of the clergy and people of this diocese. I will be sharing some of my reflections from my sabbatical this evening and my ramblings are with the publisher and should appear in the New Year in book form. The title will be *The Jewel in the Mess*.

This past year has been difficult for many because of the absence of the Assembly. There has been much said about this sad situation and there has been the usual blame game by political parties. It is tragic, at such a critical time for this province, not least with the Brexit talks, that we do not have our local Assembly meeting.

Please pray for a way forward that allows us all to build a better future, as we also find ways of dealing with the past. It is the past that still stops us from moving forward and it is critical we find ways not only of acknowledging the pain of victims, but also of bringing healing and hope.

It is also difficult listening to the constant arguments over Brexit. There are so many issues at play and it is difficult to know where the negotiations will lead us. Sadly, the border issue has become a political football in the discussions and this community deserves better than that as we have sought to build the future in peace. Please pray for those who will help shape our future and for the process that lies ahead.

Last year, I mentioned the introduction of Ordained Local Ministry as legislated for by General Synod. We have our first group of candidates selected for this local ministry and their training is in place for their first year. It was fascinating watching this ministry emerge and it has real potential, particularly at present, in the city of Belfast.

This form of ministry will supplement the ministry already in place and it will help us maintain what we have, but it is not the answer to our long-term missional needs. I will seek to address some of these issues in the open session this evening.

I have found it challenging and stimulating to be a member of the World Council of Churches Central Committee. The issues that we discuss are fascinating and to hear first-hand accounts of Christians from Syria, Palestine, the Indian Ocean, the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and many other places is challenging and refreshing.

The constant question I am left with is related to that compelling mix of gospel and culture. How much of the gospel in each and every context is influenced and shaped by the culture? This can be an influence for good and bad. However, it is critical that we are aware of how we engage with our own local culture. There is the temptation to see it as all bad and to distance ourselves from it and, indeed, to stand in judgement on it. Equally, there is the danger that we become subsumed by it and lose our identity as disciples of Jesus.

The Jesus I read about in the gospels appears to enter into the confusion of his local culture in first-century Palestine and yet finds ways of blessing people in the mess. There are real challenges for us today as to how we can connect with our local culture and communities in such a way as to have a credible voice of comfort and challenge.

The Centre of Mission continues to be a blessing to the local community in the Shankill and has brought blessing throughout the diocese. They are very grateful for the parishes that have partnered with them in the baby basics programme that has brought blessing to young mothers at a critical time in their lives. The relationships and contacts they have been building have been critical as they seek to bring blessing and hope to many people in the community.

This ministry is often unseen and my thanks go to them for their dedication to the service and care they offer. My thanks also go to Trevor Douglas who has helped to lead and shape this mission team and, indeed, has brought in much-needed funding to help.

The local parishes have also found their support encouraging and the local clergy have been very supportive and helpful. I was very encouraged to spend Holy Week there earlier this year, as we had services and events around part of the deanery. My thanks to the Rural Dean, the Revd Tracey McRoberts, and the local clergy and parishes.

Throughout the diocese, I have also been very encouraged to see the number of parishes trying new and innovative ways to engage with their local communities. We are called as local parishes to be channels of the amazing grace made known to us in Jesus. We are to find ways of incarnating the presence of Jesus in each and every local community. Our first calling as a local church is to be there for those who do not belong.

This evening, we will have the opportunity to hear some of the stories of how local parishes in different contexts have sought to be creative in their engagement with the local community. There is no simple, slick, easy formula for doing this, but we must begin by recognising that our calling as disciples is to serve the needs of others. The original meaning of the word parish is ‘those outside the house’.

The Lent course was again well attended, although we had to cancel the one in Bushmills due to the snow and the difficulty of travelling. In examining the ‘Mission of God Today’, I used the five marks of mission.

1. To tell; to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom.

 2. To teach; to teach, baptise and nurture.

 3. To tend; to respond to human need by acts of loving service.

 4. To transform; to challenge the unjust structures in society and to reject violence and pursue peace.

 5. To treasure; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

The mission of God is our primary calling and in each and every generation we must discover how we can fulfil God’s calling.

The parish issues that I mentioned last year have not changed. There are contingent problems with parish finances, church buildings and employment of clergy. These matters are critical and we will have to think creatively as we move forward because the danger as I see it is that we are so busy keeping the structures going that we fail to think outside the box. I will discuss some of these issues this evening.

There have been three more dioceses that have entered into a diocesan learning agreement as we had with Dublin and Tuam. These afford spaces for creative learning and sharing as the Church of Ireland finds new ways of being church in different contexts. There is a growing awareness that we need forms of pioneer ministries to grow new communities of church alongside the traditional parish.

The news for the Diocese of Yei continues to be disturbing and I want us to send our prayerful greetings to Bishop Hilary, the clergy and people of the Diocese of Yei as they continue to live with violence and uncertainty. Please do continue to pray for our brothers and sisters in Sudan.

In conclusion, I want to thank again the staff who are a joy to work with and who offer their skills to serve the needs of the diocese. We did say a huge thanks to Mrs. P on her retirement and I want to place my thanks to her on record at this synod. Then there was Lorraine who had the unenviable position of following Mrs. P. Lorraine, you have already become such an integral part of the team and I am very grateful for your support, organisation and friendship. We are blest by a good team and my thanks to them all: Richard, Audra, Elaine, Lorraine, Karen Bushby, Trevor, Karen Webb, Stephen, Jill, Christina, Helen and Margaret.

Thanks to the three archdeacons and the two deans and to all the rural deans; to the clergy who bear the heat and the burden of service and self-giving; and to the many faithful parishioners who, week in and out, give of themselves in service and care for others.

My special thanks to my family, Liz, Peter, Rosanna, Ruth, Matthew and Patrick. Their love and support are very special to me. The family will all be home next week as we celebrate a big birthday with Liz.

One of the joys of my sabbatical was to spend time reflecting on the gospels and the person of Jesus. He is so special, unique and beautifully human, and yet divine, showing us what God looks like in human form to inspire and encourage us as we seek to follow him and reflect him to others. The words of that famous children’s hymn are simple and yet profound:

*Jesus loves me this I know,*

*For the Bible tells me so.*

Amen