Thursday, 16 June 2022

Connor Diocesan Synod

Presidential Address

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is with a genuine sense of joy that I have called this meeting to order and we have begun our first Diocesan Synod to meet in person since we last gathered in Ballymena in 2019!

Whilst we have managed to conduct our business in the intervening years using the technology available to us, there is nothing quite like meeting together. We gather today from across the diocese to conduct the business of the synod, but to do more than that too. Beyond the pages of our agenda today happens other important business - as friendships are renewed or we are introduced to someone new, conversations are shared or ideas are picked up; encouragement is given or problems are shared. And so it should be!

For we are not simply an organisation gathering to transact business, but rather, as a small part of the body of Christ, we come together to support and encourage and help one another to overcome challenges and difficulties so that we may thrive and grow and work together for the good of the kingdom of God.

Those relationships are vital to our Christian faith. Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday, when we remind ourselves that at the heart of who God is, is this perfect relationship of Father, Son & Holy Spirit. It is a relationship characterised and constituted by love, which men and women are invited not just to observe from afar, but to participate in.

It is our positive response to that invitation to relationship with God, offered through the Son, which gives us our identity as Christians. As we hear the invitation of Jesus to “Come follow me” and respond to it, we find for ourselves the eternal life and love of God and our lives are changed - we find new purpose and direction for our living.

As we find our place as sons and daughters of the living God, we then discover a whole new set of relationships that come with that. As Christians we gather together with others in praise and worship and we find fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ. Week by week in our Parish churches give us places meet to share with one another in the joy of worship and thanksgiving to God, to share life together and to encourage one another to grow in the faith and love of Christ. They give us a focus for serving the community around us and the opportunity to invite others to discover the good news of the gospel for themselves too.

I’m thankful for the parishes across our diocese where that activity goes on and privileged now as bishop to have the chance to see and share a little of how those relationships are being lived out.

As we meet today, we are reminded of a wider set of relationships. Parishes are gathered into dioceses, and dioceses into provinces, and provinces into a worldwide family that we call the Anglican Communion. Those relationships are each important in their own way, reminding us that God’s call is to be part of a family that is bigger than our own local horizons. A reminder too, that as the church - the body of Christ - we need each other and we are called to work together, and not just within a denomination, but across them.

As I find my way into the responsibilities of being bishop in this diocese, I have found both reasons to be thankful and challenged by that understanding.

I am thankful, immensely thankful, for so much faithful work being done across the diocese by clergy and the lay leadership in parishes to shape our parishes as places where people may come, find a welcome and be invited to discover who they are in Christ. Much of this work is done through the familiar activity of maintaining parish churches to provide opportunities for worship, fellowship activities and faith development. It’s work that happens week in and week out through the activity of clergy colleagues who work faithfully at their teaching and pastoral ministry; Select Vestries who maintain and care for buildings and provide resources for parish life; volunteers who give of their time and gifts to serve in ministries of music, organisation leadership, cleaning, flower-arranging and making tea - to name but a few!

That happens too in the moments of reaching out - when a church hall is opened up to welcome those who are newly arrived in this country and whose sense of belonging is still fragile and needing nurtured. When a congregation gathers gifts to give to ‘Baby Basics’ for those who are in need or to an appeal to assist Ukrainian refugees it says we recognise that we are called to see Christ in each person. It gladdens my heart when I see church families saying “Welcome” or “We care” to those who are not identifiably part of their little church community!

For all of this work which serves the gospel and offers the love of Christ, I give thanks.

But as I’ve said, there are real challenges too! Across the diocese parishes have responded amazingly to the quandaries that we found ourselves in as a result of lockdown and the pandemic. People adapted, learned new skills, found imaginative ways of keeping connected and altered the way that they worked to meet a new situation. And yet, I hear reports that even as we begin to resume the normal patterns of church life again, congregations find that a portion of their previous worshippers have not yet returned.

Challenges too, because patterns of life have changed, people have moved away from the parishes where they used to belong and some churches find themselves disconnected from the communities where they are located.

Challenges of finance and resources; of increasing burdens of ‘red-tape’ and compliance required by civil authorities; challenges because we may find it more and more difficult to find the volunteers that we need to do everything that needs done!

As a diocese, I want us to nurture a sense of the support that we can be to one another. I frame it in that language because I think that it is vital that we understand the diocese as part of who we are, part of that wider network of relationships that connects and supports us as Christians. Just as the parish should be the primary place where individual Christians turn for support and encouragement, so I feel that the diocese should be the place where a sense of co-operation and ‘family’ is nurtured amongst parishes.

The diocese is us! Just as there would be no parish without the individuals who share in the life of the local church, so without your parishes there would be no diocese of Connor! And as I see it, the purpose of the diocese is to resource and support and encourage the work of the church in and across the parishes.

This synod meeting is when we, as representatives of the parishes, gather to hear about the work of the diocese in the past year from those you elected to the Diocesan Council. We receive the council’s report and we discuss and listen to one another and we make decisions to shape the work of the church going forward. It is important that we all play our part in that, because ‘the diocese’ is not some small group of other people, it is us - a part of who we are.

Others will shortly present that report and we will have an opportunity to discuss it together, but I want if I may to highlight just a few things that I believe are significant in how we support one another in this diocese.

Shaping ministry

Part of the role of the church at a diocesan level is to help to shape and resource the life of the church across a locality. Sometimes the structures which have served a parish well in days gone need to be looked at and new ideas discussed and tried. A parish which once had its own full-time rector may no longer have the resources to maintain that pattern. The way in which society operates has certainly changed rapidly over the years and there may be a need for new patterns of ministry to enable churches to connect meaningfully with those who don’t seem interested in what we currently have to offer. The gospel of Christ doesn’t change, but the ways that we communicate it often have to. (We’ve seen that in the last couple of years as we learned how to communicate online at a pace not many of us expected!)

Across the diocese, but particularly in the Archdeaconry of Belfast, we have seen changes that have caused us to recognise that we need to try new things in order to grow and revitalise the church. It is gratifying to see the way in which colleagues have been ready to look at things differently for the good of the church.

Under the leadership of the Rural Dean of Mid-Belfast, the Revd Tracey McRoberts and with the co-operation and support of local clergy and parishes, steps are being taken towards a more collaborative way of working across the deanery. In South Belfast it has been gratifying to see how an initiative between All Saints Parish, University Street and St Nicholas Parish on the Lisburn Road is working well and bringing new people into the life of both congregations.

As a church, we have been beginning to think about how we can put in place such new initiatives to serve and compliment the traditional parish structures. Bishop Alan worked with Church Army to bring a Centre of Mission to the diocese and that partnership with Church Army has proved fruitful in different situations across the island. Building on that, central church has brought together a working group to think and develop a strategy for new “Pioneer Ministries”.

I’m grateful to the Diocesan Council for approving my request for support for a new five-year partnership project between the Diocese, the RCB and the parishes of St Aidan, St Mary Magdalene and St Simon with St Philip, Belfast. This support will see Archdeacon Forde leave his current role in the Chaplaincy at Queen’s University to work in a new role which supports the developing of Pioneer Ministries and facilitates reshaping for mission across the Archdeaconry and does so grounded in the particular context of the parishes of Inner South Belfast.

It is an exciting project and I have no doubt that the experiences and learning which is done in the context of Belfast will quickly have application across the wider diocese and indeed the Church of Ireland. Barry will take up this new role, God-willing, on 1 August this year and you will have seen that we are currently advertising for a full-time colleague to work under his direction in the parishes. Please pray that we will find the right person for this important role.

Safeguarding relationships

It is vitally important that those who engage in the life of our churches can do so safely. First and foremost, this is so because the life of the church is to be about bringing blessing and hope into the lives of those whom the Father has created in his own image and who Christ has died for. It is a secondary matter that the state puts obligations on all those who work with children and ‘adults at risk’.

Im very grateful to Archdeacon McBride for his lead in facilitating the support for parishes in this diocese around Safeguarding Trust and to our new Church of Ireland Safeguarding Officer for Northern Ireland, Mrs Gillian Taylor for her advice and help. Gillian is new into the role, but is already demonstrating her ability to support and help us follow best practice in this area.

Every parish panel was invited to refresher evenings last month and there are some online sessions for those who were not able to attend the sessions in Antrim. Parishes have also been given details of training opportunities for panel members and volunteers over the next few months. It is in the interest of every leader and child in every parish and organisation that our procedures are carefully in place so that everyone is protected.

Welcome

We have welcomed new members to the Connor clergy team in recent weeks. The Revd Jacob Mercer has moved from Bermondsey in London to become Priest-in-charge of St Brigid’s, Mallusk and The Revd Andrew Irwin has joined us from Seapatrick parish in Banbridge to become curate at St Paul & St Barnabas, York Street. Andrew’s appointment has been made possible with the generous support of the St James’s Trust, for which I and the parish are very grateful.

Farewell

Our grateful thanks must go to the Revd Philip Benson who left the parish of Kilwaughter & Cairncastle with All Saint’s Craigyhill during the year to take up an incumbency in the Diocese of Derry. Not only did Philip do a wonderful job of leading the people in those parishes, but he served as Chair of the Diocesan Youth Council and gave an enthusiastic lead to the work amongst young people in the diocese.

Mr George Briggs has been a hard-working member of the Diocesan Council for many years, giving of his time and abilities generously for the good of the diocese. He indicated to me during the year that the time had come for him to lay down those responsibilities and I know you will want to join with me in recording our thanks to George for all his years of service. I am grateful that George continues to play a part in the life St Mark’s Ballysillan. I’m delighted that he and Norma were able to accept my nomination to attend the Royal Maunday service in Windsor this year and we wish them both every blessing in the days ahead.

Thanks

Dean Stephen Forde & Dean Sam Wright - for their leadership of our cathedrals and personally for their work this year in organising two contrasting but very meaningful services of installation for a ‘nearly-new’ bishop!

Dean John Bond, our Diocesan Curate and the team of retired clergy and lay readers who provide for worship in vacant parishes and often at short notice when sickness strikes

The Archdeacons - who as well as exercising significant ministries in their own busy parish situations found the time to support me by taking on additional work in the life of the wider diocese.

The Diocesan Staff - who have worked faithfully over the last year, in the office and from home, to support the ongoing life of our diocese and parishes. Particular thanks to my own PA Mrs Lorraine Ogilby for all her patience and forbearing as she tries to keep me on the right road.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is privilege to share in the life of this diocese as your bishop. I have enjoyed the opportunity to begin to nurture my own relationship with many of you in that role and I look forward to what God will have for us together in the year that lies ahead. May we all serve Him and his church with faithfulness and joy.