22 June 2023 11:30am

Diocese of Connor - Diocesan Synod 2023

Presidential Address by Bishop George Davison

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the Connor Diocesan Synod met last June in St Anne’s Cathedral, many of us had been just been involved in events for the long Bank Holiday celebrating Queen Elizabeth’s Platinum Jubilee; we had digested the results of the May elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly and were wondering when the political parties would form a new Executive at Stormont; we were wondering how long the people of Ukraine could hold out against the might of Vladimir Putin’s army following the invasion that had taken place in February; and Boris Johnston was just about to complete his third year as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

The same building in which we held our synod meeting in June became a focus for the people of the United Kingdom in September, as we mourned the only British monarch that many of us had ever known. I want to pay tribute to Dean Stephen Forde for the meticulous planning that he had done in preparation for such a day. It is tribute to his preparations, and to the hard work of Trevor Douglas and all the Cathedral staff, ably aided by Canon Kevin Graham and members of the Cathedral community, that Belfast Cathedral provided such a fitting setting for the Northern Irish service of commemoration of Her Late Majesty. I think that we can be immensely proud of the role played by many members of our diocese on this solemn, but important occasion in our national life. The ultimate compliment came from the lips of our new King as he left the cathedral at the end of the service and told me, that it had been ‘just perfect!’

In many ways, all of that seems a long time ago and we have since celebrated King Charles’ coronation and just last weekend saw him celebrate his first official birthday with the Trooping of the Colour and the announcement of the Birthday Honours list. It would be remiss of me not to mention that one of those honoured in that list was the Rector of St Matthew’s Belfast & Rural Dean of Mid-Belfast, The Revd Tracey McRoberts. Her commitment and service to the community of Belfast has received the recognition it richly deserves. I’m sure synod would want to join me in offering our sincere congratulations to Tracey on this honour.

Just as there has been significant change in the monarchy since Synod 2022, the world of politics has also shifted and we are now on our third Prime Minister in the same period.

However not all has moved quickly in the world of politics! We might say today that some aspects of our life have changed radically, whereas in others, little is different Here in Northern Ireland we still find ourselves in a political and economic stalemate, now sixteen months after the Assembly elections.

I am not a politician, that is not my calling or role, and therefore I have no interest in becoming embroiled in any sort of party politics, but I am a follower of Jesus Christ and, as such, we are bound to have a concern for the poor and needy, and to speak up for those who suffer.

The continued political vacuum in Northern Ireland, the absence of meaningful government in this province, is having real and profound effects on our health service, on our schools, on our economy. The result of that is that people across Northern Irish society are suffering. Like many others, I know people who cannot get timely medical attention; whose children are missing out on educational opportunities; and families who are simply struggling to make ends meet.

I’m thankful for the practical ways in which Christian people in Connor diocese seek to help in these situations - through the likes of Baby Basics ministries, support for local food banks and parishes which provide spaces for people to find warmth and a friendly face. But we also must be urging our political representatives, of whatever party, to knuckle down, take the difficult decisions and make political progress for the good of us all. I do not envy politicians their jobs and I believe that we should be encouraging them with our prayers rather than criticising or pulling them down, but we do need say clearly that this stalemate needs to end for the good of everyone.

We recognise that changing times can be challenging for all of us, in church life as well as in the life of the community that we are a part of and yet those changes and challenges can also give us the opportunity to respond in new ways and to grow in ourselves and in our service.

In November last year, I was privileged to spend a couple of days with my clergy colleagues at our diocesan clergy conference. This conference, which takes place just once every three years, gives us the opportunity to draw aside from our parish responsibilities briefly to gather for reflection and worship together and to encourage one another. During those couple of days I shared with colleagues the beginnings of what I hope will be our theme for our life and work together in the diocese over the next number of years as I outlined my hope that in Connor Diocese we would be “Growing Healthy Churches”.

‘Growing Healthy Churches’ can serve a statement of both what we want to do and what we want to be in the diocese. We all know the challenges that we face, I talked a bit about that in my address to the synod last year, but the gospel of Jesus Christ is a message about new possibilities, about transformation, about new life, about hope. If we are being faithful to the call and commission of Jesus, then each of our parishes, our church communities, our spiritual families can and should be a ‘growing, healthy church’ by definition.

We should be growing - in spiritual depth as we gather together and encourage on another in our walk with God, in our worship in our knowledge of God’s word and in our commitment to serve his kingdom. And we will be growing in numbers as we reach out to others around us and invite them to come and share in the good news and the life of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

What do we mean when we say that a church is healthy? Jesus helps us understand what that looks like as he shares the image of a vine and its branches (John 15). We are healthy when we remain close to Jesus and grounded in His word, grafted and rooted in Him, bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God.

Paul also uses pictorial imagery as he speaks of a healthy church as a body where all the parts function together (1 Cor 12). Every member has a part to play and each fulfils their role within the life of the body, living for each other, looking beyond ourselves and contributing to the life of the whole body.

So there’s a place to begin, a place to benchmark from if you like. And maybe an opportunity to ask ourselves honest questions. What are we doing well? What signs of health do we see in the lives of our congregations? And what signs of growth do we see amongst us?

Can I suggest to you that in virtually every congregation in this diocese, there will be things that we are doing well, things that we can celebrate. And in every congregation in this diocese there will be ways in which we can grow, improve , do better. I want also to suggest to you that as we seek to be Growing Healthy Churches we will almost always be capable of more and better when we look beyond ourselves and work together with others. So part of our work together over these next number of years will be to recognise the ways in which we can encourage and support each other and spur one another on to deeper and greater service of the Lord Jesus.

Sometimes that will be about building on the things that we are already doing well, nurturing the signs of health and growth that are already evident and drawing others in to work and build on what is already good. At other times it will be about new initiatives, starting something fresh, building new relationships so that the kingdom of God can find fresh places to grow.

The Church of Ireland Pioneer Ministry project may be one of the resources that helps us come to the task of ‘Growing Healthy Churches’ with fresh vision. I was pleased to join others from across the Church of Ireland for the launch of the project this year in St Patrick’s Cathedral Dublin and I’m delighted that the Director, the Revd Rob Jones is with us today. We’ll have the opportunity to hear briefly from Rob later in the course of the synod, but do take the opportunity to have a conversation with him during the day and engage with him about how we might reach out to those who currently have little or no connection with the church.

At its most basic level though, Growing Healthy Churches will not be about programs or activities, though these will often be helpful, but essentially it will begin in the hearts and minds of each one of us as we allow the Spirit of God to be at work in us. Growing, healthy disciples will be the building blocks which enable us to construct growing healthy churches and that takes place step by step.

Imagine the difference it would make if each person in Connor diocese took one step forward in faith and service! It would be transformational! Even if each member of this synod were to go back to our parishes ready to take our next step it would make a huge difference. What is God calling you to today? Is it a step forward in your personal commitment to Christ, in your devotional life? Is it something that you might offer as a new form of service practically, or liturgically in your parish?

These things will be different for each person as the Lord calls and equips us for our role within the body of Christ, but no-one is simply called to be a spectator in the life of Christ’s church and I would encourage each of us to be attentive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit as he leads us to Take the Next Step in faith and service.

Clergy changes

It is always a pleasure to welcome new members to the clergy team in Connor and this year I was glad to institute the Revd Geoff Haugh to serve in Billy & Derrykeighan. On Sunday evening next we will welcome the Revd Ross Mungavin as Associate Minister in the South Belfast Mission Area and later in the summer Archdeacon Brian Harper will move from Clogher diocese to become rector of Dunluce. The people of St Paul’s Lisburn will welcome their new rector, the Rt Revd Darren McCartney in early September. Darren is currently rector of Warrenpoint & Rostrevor in the diocese of Dromore, but his move to Connor will be a homecoming in many ways, since he began his ministry in the Church of Ireland in Carrickfergus and grew up in the diocese too.

Within the diocese, other members of the clergy have begun new ministries or taken on extra responsibilities. The Revd Arlene Moore, the Revd Mark Reid, the Revd John Farr the Revd Adrian Halligan and the Revd Derek Harrington have all taken on new or additional roles within the diocese. I’m also glad to report that the recent curacy round saw the appointment of the Revds Lee Boal and Gareth Campbell to parishes within the diocese and we send our good wishes to the Revd Andrew Neill as he concludes his internship in Agherton and moves to take up a curacy in the diocese of Derry.

During the year we also saw the conclusion of some very faithful ministries - Canon George Graham (Dunluce) and the Revd Elaine O’Brien (Whitehouse & St Ninan) have retired during the past year and the people of Kilbride are just taking in the news that their Rector, Canon David Humphries will be retiring at the end of the summer. I want to pay tribute to each one of them and thank them for their service as we we wish them a happy and fruitful retirement.

I want to say thank you too, to the Revd Ruth Patterson as she concludes her time as minister of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Monkstown. Ruth will shortly take up new responsibilities within the Methodist Church. I’m glad to say that she won’t be moving too far as she will be taking charge of Ballymena Methodist circuit, but Ruth we are very grateful to you for all that you have given to the folk in Monkstown and to the Rural Deanery of North Belfast & the wider diocese. We won’t lose touch entirely as Ruth continues in her role as an Ecumenical Canon in Belfast Cathedral.

Staff matters

During the past year we saw a number of changes in the staffing in the Diocesan Office. We have welcomed Mrs Sue Majury as part time Administrative Officer to bring the office strength back to a more normal level following Audra Irvine’s retirement. I am very thankful to Richard Cotter and Elaine Wright for the way in which they have held the fort over the last couple of years, but I know that they are glad as we are to have Sue’s assistance in the Diocesan Office. We welcome Sue to her first Synod meeting today.

Mr David McGrory has also recently joined the diocese as our Safeguarding Compliance Officer. We are very conscious of the importance of good Safeguarding practice for all of us - children, leaders, clergy and Select Vestries alike. In appointing David we are the fourth diocese in Northern Ireland to have a dedicated officer to assist us in meeting our responsibilities and ensuring that our activity in the parishes and diocese takes place in a setting that is safe for all concerned. Archdeacon McBride will be introducing David to us later in the Synod today, and giving us a chance to get to know how he can help support our work with children and young people.

Finally on the staff front, we have had a temporary absence over the last few months. Our Children’s Officer, Mrs Victoria Jackson, has been on maternity leave and has added to the count of children in the diocese when she gave birth to her daughter April, in the autumn. We congratulate Victoria and her husband Paul on their happy news and look forward to welcoming Victoria back when she returns to work in September.

Church House

After three decades in Donegall Street, the Diocesan Office is moving! Those of you who have been past the office recently will have seen the estate agents’ sign on the front of the building. For some time the Joint Committee which looks after the building on behalf of the two dioceses have been aware that Church House will soon need substantial amounts of money spent on it - more substantial money than was readily available to the Joint Committee.

Following our return to the offices after Covid there was also a recognition that those who use the building do so in a different way to that which was the norm before the pandemic. A Health and Safety inspection meant that we did not have the luxury of remaining in the building while we considered our future needs. As a result our Diocesan Councils approved a proposal to put the property on the market and look for suitable property to rent in the city for a few years as temporary premises whilst both dioceses make longer term decisions about what is needed in a diocesan office.

Temporary offices which will accommodate both dioceses have been obtained just a short distance away in the Titanic Quarter and the move is due to take place in the middle of July.

I want to pay tribute to the staff for their forbearance in the midst of all this upheaval. The offices will close for normal business tomorrow to allow staff time to prepare for the move and will re-open at the end of July once we have had time to re-organise ourselves in the new premises.

I’m thankful for our fellowship together in the work of this diocese. I pray that our meeting together today will be an opportunity, not just to transact the formal business of the synod, but a time for making connections, for encouraging conversations, for resourcing one another and helping each other to be ‘Growing Healthy Churches’ across the length and breadth of Connor diocese.

May we know the blessing of God as we seek to serve Him in love and faithfulness.