Thursday 13 June 2024

Connor Diocesan Synod 2024 - Presidential Address

Subject

* Ladies & Gentlemen,
* As we gather today in Lisburn for the annual meeting of the Connor Diocesan Synod can I welcome you to this place and thank you for your willingness to serve your parishes and our church by acting as representative to this synod. Some of you will be relatively new to the role, whilst others will have been coming to the Diocesan Synod for longer than they care to remember!
* However long or short a time we have been members of the synod, we have all been elected by the parishes of this diocese to be their representatives here. At a time when when we are particularly conscious of a whole variety of elections taking place right around the world, we can end up wondering about the value of these things. It can be easy to fall into a media-fuelled cynicism about the divisions in society that seems to be prevalent around election times, but we are also all to aware of the importance of having good representatives who will work constructively for our common good.
* This meeting serves as a visible reminder to us that as we gather week by week in our respective parishes, to worship and to share in fellowship and service together; we do so as part of something bigger. We are part of a diocese, which in turn is part of a national church, which is part of a fellowship of Christians which reaches right around the world. Whilst our principal focus in our Christian lives is rightly the community where we live, it is important that we recognise our place in the wider work that God is doing in his world; important too that we take time to consider how we work together and encourage one another in the joys and the challenges of serving Christ in His world today.
* “Growing Healthy Churches” - our Connor Diocesan strapline, which I introduced to you last year, challenges us to consistently be thinking about what it means to be Growing Healthy Churches. It is not so much a program of activity, to add to the growing list of things that we have to do, but an ethos which I hope will undergird all that we do. As we make decisions about how we do things, how we use our resources, about our activity in our parishes and in our life together as a diocese we should always be asking the question, “How will this help us to be a growing, healthy church?”
* At a diocesan level, “Growing Healthy Churches” reminds us that we need to consider our structures and shape them to serve the parishes across the diocese of Connor. I might mention just a few ways in which we are trying to do that more effectively.
  + Our small diocesan staff team work hard to try to help our parishes, both in growing ministry and in working through the requirements of compliance with the various aspects of administrative good practice and legal requirements which are increasingly expected of us.
    - Christina & Victoria continue to help churches across the diocese as they engage with young people and their families. It has been particularly good to hear about new work being supported in parishes and additional churches becoming engaged with training and events organised at a diocesan level.
    - David McGrory, our Safeguarding Compliance Officer, who was introduced to you at the Synod in Ballymoney last year, has worked to create a new Diocesan Safeguarding Support Team, provided numerous opportunities for Safeguarding training during the year and has supported the first groups of parishes through the Parish Audit process.
    - Our Administrative staff team have just rolled out the new online system for submitting parish returns and are supporting parishes as they get used to this new streamlined method of administration. In addition, they answer a significant number of requests from parishes about a whole range of matters relating to administration, property matters, Charity Commission, etc.
  + The Diocesan Council, conscious of the increasing costs faced by all of us, seeks to control costs and budget accordingly. It was this that led to the decision last year to sell the increasingly costly Diocesan Offices in Donegall Street and work with our neighbours in Down & Dromore & the RCB to consider more appropriate arrangements going forward. A successful move to our temporary home in the Titanic Quarter took place last summer and discussions are underway about what our next steps will be when our lease on Old Channel Road concludes in the summer of 2026. In all of these discussions, value for money and working within our means are significant factors in our thinking.
  + I have spoken before about the challenges of changing patterns of life and ministry and these are particularly acute in some parts of the diocese where parishes find themselves struggling to support the structures which previously brought great blessing to them. As a Diocesan team we continue to work with parishes to consider how we might respond to changing patterns of population, particularly across the Archdeaconry of Belfast, in a way that enables the us to continue to serve these communities and to have Growing Healthy Churches at the heart of them.
  + These conversations are often challenging and mean stepping beyond comfort zones as we try to build a positive future for our church. Indeed, sometimes we are asking a huge amount of small faithful congregations and heartbreaking decisions are being wrestled with as we face the current realities. But we are committed to working with these congregations to shape a future for them and their communities.
  + Pioneer Ministry - we welcomed the Revd Rob Jones to our diocesan synod in Ballymoney last year to tell us a little about the Church of Ireland’s new pioneer ministry programme for reaching those who are unchurched and creating new communities of faith. In the past year, we have begun to think about how pioneer ministry might be shaped in our own diocese. The Revd James Boyd has agreed to be our Pioneer Ministry co-ordinator and he has begun to work with a small team of volunteers to support and advocate for pioneer ministry in Connor.
  + A number of Connor parishes have engaged with the central pioneer process and whilst commending them all for their vision and work, I’m delighted to say that the South Lisburn Church plant in the Hillhall estate has been approved for central church funding and the Revd Pete Meenagh will be undertaking the training program for Pioneer Ministers beginning in September.
  + Vocations - at the heart of Christianity is the call to serve. It is a call to every believer, but we recognise that each call is personal and we serve in a wide variety of ways. Nonetheless, within the life of the church when we talk about vocation we often think of the call to ordained ministry. We have been blessed in recent years to have had the Revd Kevin Graham as our Diocesan Director of Ordinands. Kevin has undertaken that role diligently and has played a huge part in supporting a number of people through the process of discerning a call to ordination. During his time as DDO he has worked alongside our Warden of Readers, the Revd Peter Jones to create a co-ordinated approach to vocations to ordained and lay ministry and overseen the change from a more traditional “Fellowship of Vocation” to the “Discerning Ministry Connor” group. Kevin has recently retired from the role of DDO and I simply want to take this opportunity to thank him for all that he has done for us as a diocese in that position. A bishop works closely with their director of Ordinands & I personally have been immensely grateful to him for his diligence and wise advice.
  + As I think about a new appointment as DDO and recognising the broadening range of vocational roles (OLM, Pioneer) in the Church of Ireland, I am taking time to reflect further on the whole area of vocational call. I will shortly announce the format of the team of people who might help us build on the excellent foundations already laid.
* Retirements/ New appointments
  + Since we last met, Canon David Humphries retired from Kilbride parish at the end of last summer and Canon William Taggart retired from St Katharine’s at the end of April. I want to pay particular tribute to William for all that he has given to the people of St Katharine’s over a lifetime of service to them. There have been challenging times and circumstances over the years, but William showed faithfulness, commitment and pastoral devotion to his people in good times and in bad and for that they and we are immensely grateful. In wishing William well for his retirement, I am thankful that he will continue to serve for a time as our Diocesan Registrar and that he has agreed to train the Revd Alan McCann as Assistant Registrar during that time.
  + A number of clergy have moved to new appointments during the year. The Revd Linda Cronin served the people of Glenavy over the past 4 years, but family circumstances have led her to return to the Church of England as Incumbent of Dawlish in the Diocese of Exeter. Canon Derek Kerr hasn’t moved quite so far, but he has moved to the Diocese of Armagh. I’m grateful to both of them for all that they gave of themselves to their parishes over their time in the diocese and wish them well in their new ministries. In addition to being Vicar of Drummaul, Duneane & Ballyscullion, Derek also served as Rural Dean of Antrim with some distinction and we welcome the Revd Jonny Campbell-Smyth as his successor in that role.
  + We will shortly also be losing the Revd Andrew Campbell to the diocese of Armagh too. Andrew, as you prepare to take up your new position as Rector of Magherafelt can we thank you for your service to the people of Broughshane and wish you, Allison & your children every happiness in your new home & ministry.
  + As well as saying farewells, I’m glad to be able to report that we have welcomed others to new ministries in the diocese.
  + Darren McCartney is now Rector of St Paul’s Lisburn, Brian Harper is Rector of Dunluce Parish, Bushmills; Ross Mungavin is Associate Minister in the Inner South Belfast parishes, soon to be known as the Blackstaff Mission Area! Nathan Ervine has taken up the charge of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Monkstown and Brian Shaw is serving as OLM deacon in the parish of Agherton alongside the Revd Malcolm Ferry.
  + As a result of recent appointments, I’m delighted to say that the Revd Jacob Mercer has been appointed incumbent of the parish of Mallusk, where he currently serves as Priest-in-charge. It is a tribute to the work that Jake has done amongst the people of Glengormley that we are in a position to appoint him Rector of the parish and we pray God’s continued blessing on him in the years ahead. Following the recent curacy round, I’m pleased to say that Revd Cameron Mack will serve his curacy in Belfast Cathedral and the Revd Shona Bell will serve as part-time curate in the Parish of Ramoan & Culfeightrin. Do please pray for them both as they are ordained on St Peter’s Day (Sat 29th June) in Ballycastle.
* Thanks
  + Dean John Bond, our Diocesan Curate and the team of retired clergy and lay readers who assist him in providing regular Sunday 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 - particularly to my PA Mrs Lorraine Ogilby for all her support to me in my role, not least in the very challenging personal circumstances of having to care for her parents through illness in the past year and then the heartbreak of burying them both in the past month.
* Whatever your role in ministry in Connor Diocese from the smallest parish to the largest cathedral, whether you wear a collar or exercise your ministry with a sweeping brush, it’s my prayer that you will know the value that we place on what you do and pray too that you will know the equipping of God’s Spirit as we serve him together in this diocese.