

Presidential Address to the Synod of the Diocese of Down and Dromore on Thursday 19 June 2008 by Bishop Harold Miller

Every Diocesan Synod takes place within a context. This year it is in the context of the Jethro Centre, in Lurgan, of which we as a diocese are justly proud. Jethro is a model and example of community partnership and engagement brought to birth through a church in this diocese. That is, as it were, the immediate context in which we meet. This is also the first year of a new triennium – so another aspect of our context is that many of you are new members of the Diocesan Synod. Some because you have recently come to serve in the ministry of this diocese of Down & Dromore (not least our one new deacon, Gary McMurray, just ordained last Sunday in Dromore Cathedral and our eight new priests about to be ordained in Down Cathedral on Sunday night). But many others among you are here for the first time as members of Diocesan Synod because you have been elected last Easter. Next year we hope to add to that number a ‘fresh’ group of younger members who I believe, like you, will have much to offer. That is the context of who we are, and where we find ourselves today.

We also stand, however, in the wider context of the society and world in which we live, which is at a time of great change. We see it all around. Here in Northern Ireland, we came to the end of an era with the retirement of Dr Ian Paisley, and find ourselves with a new First Minister in Peter Robinson. In the Republic, there is a new Taoiseach in Brian Cowan, and in the UK, there has been the sense that we just might be coming towards the end of a long period of government by the Labour Party – but I wouldn’t wish to be prophetic about the future in Westminster! And I don’t have to tell you (or the media) that George Bush has just visited Northern Ireland this very week, and that the Presidential election issue is well underway in the United States, building up to a new US President in 2009.

In more general terms, we are seeing big economic changes, not only in the cost of fuel and of mortgages, but also in the cost of food and the very basics of life. These changes are giving all of us a sense that we have to ‘cut our cloth’, but are leaving the most vulnerable and poor in our midst in deep distress and fearful for the future.

The third context in which we meet is the wider ‘Church’ context in both the Church of Ireland, and the wider Anglican Communion (and perhaps in particular, the up-and-coming Lambeth Conference). It is these areas which I wish to address in particular at this year’s Diocesan Synod. I will focus first on the Church of Ireland Bishops’ Mission Statement, which was sent to all of you in preparation for this Synod, and then moving on to the Anglican Communion and the Lambeth Conference.

The Bishops’ Mission Statement

First of all Bishops’ Mission Statement came about, I believe, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit in a variety of ways. Some years ago, when the Theological College participated in an external review some years ago, the question was asked: What do the Bishops believe is the mission of the Church of Ireland over the next period of time? In other words, if Bishops are to be the leaders of the church in apostolic mission, what does that mission look like in this particular age? That is a

very important question, and because it was raised in the context of Theological Education, it needed to be answered, as the new Theological Institute was being conceived. (May I say at this point what a joy it was to this diocese that Dr Maurice Elliott, former rector of this very parish has been appointed as the new Director of the Theological Institute. We hold Maurice in our prayers at an exciting and challenging time of newness in that part of our church life also).

At the same time, people have been asking all sorts of questions, not only about the make-up of General Synod, but also about how we do our business at the General Synod. This led to a review by the Honorary Secretaries of the rather cumbersome committee structures we have inherited, and that too has been brought into the orbit of the Bishops' Mission Statement.

Here is how it reads:

The Church of Ireland, as an authentic part of the universal church of God, is called to develop growing communities of faith, in and through which the Kingdom of God is made known, and in which the whole people serve together as followers of Jesus Christ for the good of the world and the Glory of God.

A long, but clear and significant sentence.

To sum it up, three words were extracted and highlighted:

- Growth
- Unity
- Service.

I would imagine that everyone in this synod would say 'Amen' to that. But, if this vision is to be made concrete and real, it must be embraced and engaged with at every kind of level. This means, not least, here in Diocesan Synod in the way we do business, and I hope you will use well the time assigned to responding to the Vision Statement before lunch today. It also, I believe, can be passed down to the new Regional 'Area' Deaneries, which are being proposed at this Synod. These deaneries have not been realigned simply for the sake of change – they have been realigned to create more meaningful 'mission areas' in which we can support one another, sharpen one another and speak with a united voice. They will come into being, if the resolution is passed, on 1 September, and I will be proposing ways of helping them, in their early days, to engage with a new missional focus.

But the vision also needs to be implemented at parish level. Note that the key role of the church in the statement is to develop 'growing communities of faith'. I am a great believer in the local church and the values of Christ being made visible in local congregations of faith. There is nothing more powerful than an unbeliever coming among the people of God in its concrete, congregational expression, and knowing that they have had a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Let me look with you, for a few minutes, at each of the more worked-out areas: *growth – unity – service* and how they might apply to us. This is only a 'starter for ten'. You will continue on in the debate after this address.

A. WORSHIP AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Through stillness, through celebrating, through drinking deeply of the wells of salvation, we are called to explore God's beauty and love, to renew the face of the earth, and to recover the divine image that is within us.

Hence we must:

- *Acknowledge that worship is God's primary purpose*
- *Offer worship that articulates with and evokes holy beauty*
- *Ensure that our worship is rooted in the faith once delivered, but is never static*
- *Pray that it may be magnetically attractive, energizing and informing the building of the Kingdom*
- *Rejoice that through it countless individuals form one body in Christ.*

I must confess that, as your bishop for more than 11 years and as someone with a particular interest in and heart for the liturgical life of the church, I have never really focussed in with you or with the clergy, on the theme of 'Worship'. Perhaps now is the time to begin, for surely nothing is more important and central in the life of the church. Worship gathers the people of God; worship lifts us outside ourselves into the heavenly places; worship speaks into our every experience of our lives, whether filled with joy or devastated with sadness; worship is our eternal destiny, worship is where we corporately learn from God, and speak to God; where we walk through the story of faith year after year; and worship is the means by which we are knit together as one body.

That all sounds wonderful, but I, and we, must be honest as well. Much of our worship is dull and disappointing; some of it is trivial and earthbound. In reality we sometimes dread outsiders coming into some of our services because we know they will not return; the Word sometimes comes across at times as wooden and predictable in some our congregations; Easter Day and Good Friday sometimes 'feel' the same; and many congregations fall into a state of semi-conscious half-engagement – a nether-world, until they can see the light of day again at the end of the service.

That, by the way, is a drawing together of the worst sides of our experience: there is the other end of the spectrum as well – the times of grace, the vibrant word, the uplifting singing; the spiritually deep moments of silence, and the warm welcome of loving communities.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, we are being invited to return to the much remembered statement in the 'First of All' report: 'the first priority of the Church is spiritual' and to focus in on our worship life. That is perhaps the most important single thing we can do for evangelism.

Might I also, under this section add a little bit about children. Our Council for Mission is bringing to the Diocesan Synod this year a resolution about a Children's Officer. I have said now on several occasions that we must, as a matter of urgency, begin to work together as a diocese on renewing our vision for the passing on our faith to our children. Growing churches are places where children can feel at home, where they imbibe faith from the community, and where they being to engage with prayer and worship and learn the story of the faith because they are in the presence of praying and worshipping people. I do hope that we will be able, over the coming year, to engage with this area of our life.

That is your Starter for Ten on worship and spiritual growth.

B. UNITY AND DIALOGUE

The Church is called to be an agent of God's purpose to bring all things together in Christ: to be the sign, instrument and first fruits of that oneness in Christ that is God's gift and God's will.

Hence we must:

- *Strive to live in unity and peace among ourselves and with the whole family of God*
- *Model respectful relations with humanity and the whole created order*
- *Develop common life and action with other Christian Traditions*
- *Work for greater mutual understanding with those of other faiths and none.*

Three things I want to say about this area:

- (1) *In Northern Ireland, we really must have an intentional shared future.* This does not simply happen by talking about in and doing nothing. I mentioned in my synod address last year that we need people to paint a picture of a new and integrated society which we can buy into. I do not have to say again, and you know it, that we are more divided, housing-wise, than ever in this province. And we meet today in perhaps the most evenly-divided town of all – Lurgan. Intentionality is the name of the game. And I worry that our MLA's could easily take their eye off the ball, specially with the way we do things in our Assembly, which makes it easier to play to individual 'political' galleries than to make for an integrated community. I would also add that we in the churches need to continue to play our part in the creation of a shared future, even, as you saw in the video, if that is costly to our denominational allegiances.
- (2) *We must value the blessing we have received or have received from other Christian traditions.* During the last six months, I have experienced a veritable smorgasbord of other traditions. I have preached for the Methodists, Christian Fellowship Church, the Presbyterians, the Moravians, and I will preach, God willing, at the Clonard Novena next week. Do you know something; I have loved every minute of it. It is a little worrying when people say at the end 'You preach like a Presbyterian/Methodist/whatever' (and I don't know that they will say about Clonard). But let's be honest – and especially in relation to an Methodist/Church of Ireland Covenant – we have all so much more which unites us than that which divides us, and a great deal to learn from other Christian traditions and enrich our Christian values.
- (3) The third area of Unity and Dialogue is rather sad – *the divisions which lie among ourselves in the Anglican Communion and under the surface in the Church of Ireland.* Now I say that with a sense of thanksgiving for both the unity and honesty which I experience in this diocese and for the fact that we have held together in the Church of Ireland through thick and thin: I will return to the Anglican Communion and Lambeth later. But we must ask the question, how do we proclaim unity if we cannot model unity?

That is your Starter for Ten on Unity and Dialogue.

C. LIVING GOD'S KINGDOM AND SERVING THE WORLD

Aligning ourselves daily with Christ's own prayer and example, the calling of the church is to pray for, discern and realize the presence of God's Kingdom among us.

Hence we must:

- *Engage compassionately with the world and society in all its rich variety of need and opportunity*
 - *Be both disciples and discipling: perpetual learners in the school of Christ as we ourselves strive to teach and serve others.*
 - *Daily and energetically embody and proclaim the values of the Kingdom for whose coming we long.*
- Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.*

I think the first thing we must say about this particular aspect – let’s call it ‘service’ – is that the church is engaged in service in every area of life in Northern Ireland in every place and probably in every single street. Where Christians are, the Church is present. Our service is just as much service when it is not institutionally formed or ‘noticed’.

What I mean can be illustrated like this: The Church is present in the Assembly at Stormont, even if it is noticeably without Chaplains. The Church is present because so many of our MLA’s, and those who work at Stormont embrace the Christian faith. The Church is present in the Civil Service – in every department – and not least in the Head of the Civil Service, Sir Nigel Hamilton, a committed Methodist who retires this month. Bruce Robinson, who takes over Nigel’s role, is Clerk of Session of Newtownbreda Presbyterian Church. The Church is present in Medicine and Nursing. If you took all the Christian medics and nurses out we probably couldn’t function. The Church is present in Education, which is ‘Christian’ not just because of our history and standing in so many schools, but because of Christian teachers. The Church is present in the wee streets in Ballymacarret, and in high rise flats in Mount Merrion, in the leafy suburbs like Knock, in provincial towns like Portadown, and in the midst of farming communities – anywhere where there are believers who love and serve the Lord the Church is present.

But that does not mean that the Church as a body should not be clearly and institutionally outwardly-focussed in service as well. One of the things I am grateful for is seeing more churches engaged, not least through CREED, in Community Audits, and in thinking creatively about meeting real needs of real people in a real Kingdom way. Keep it up! And may the Lord give us more!

And we know well in this diocese, that the Church lives God’s Kingdom and serves the world not only locally, but in very real, worldwide engagement. We have not only links throughout the world through friendships, mission societies and developing world agencies; but also through teams of people who often give up their holidays to engage with and serve in other places and who come back fired in their faith, and with a real passion to help financially, practically and in prayer.

Your starter for ten on Living God’s Kingdom and Serving the World.

Well, I move then, from the excitement of those key areas in the Bishops’ Mission Statement, to an area I cannot avoid on 19 June 2008, less than a month before the beginning of the

Lambeth Conference. Let me be honest with you: I thought long and hard before deciding to go to the Lambeth Conference this year. So long and so hard that, when I detailed my thinking of the issues I have been examining to the clergy in an *Ad Clerum*, several said to me: 'When we were reading it, we thought you weren't going, but then we got to the last sentence which said you were!' They were discerning people, and what they said made me think.

Here are some of my issues:

(i) *Up to a quarter of our bishops in the Communion will probably not feel able to be at Lambeth this year.* And they probably represent around 50% of our membership of the Anglican Communion. The way they see it is this: The Episcopal Church has not abided by what it was asked to do in Lambeth 1:10 and subsequently by the other instruments of the Anglican Communion. Those who consecrated Gene Robinson will be there, and (in the case of some parts of Africa in particular) the witness of the Church in their culture will be undermined by the media circus which will follow the Bishop of New Hampshire. I am deeply saddened that about 200 bishops, some from the fastest-growing parts of the Communion, will not be present. I really wish they could be there, not least because many are close friends. But they do not feel able to come, and I believe that will have certain effects:

- It will undermine to some degree the moral authority of Lambeth
- It will mean we are only a partial 'communion' gathered, as has happened before
- It will mean those voices cannot be heard at Lambeth.

As you know, at this very moment, many of these people are meeting at the GAFCON Conference in the Middle East, and many of us will be listening carefully at what they say.

(ii) *The Nature of the Conference will be quite different.* It will be like a retreat-come-training-conference and a meeting and listening place for bishops. That bothers me, even if it is the only realistic thing which can happen. Again, I ask certain questions:

- Who is doing the 'training' and how is it going to be 'slanted, or is it, or will it be neutral?
- What exactly does 'listening' mean - when The Episcopal Church in the USA does not seem to have listened? Does it mean 'you must keep on listening till you come round to a particular point of view'?
- Is it worth the vast sums of money being expended simply to do something to keep the show on the road!

(iii) *I am concerned about who has and has not been invited.* Let me give you two illustrations. Bishop Robinson Cavalcanti, with the vast majority of clergy in his diocese, was removed from the Episcopal Church of Brazil because of his conservative way of thinking. I had the great pleasure of visiting one of his churches in Recife a year and a half ago while on holiday. They had been removed and came under the protection of the Southern Cone. They were vibrant, growing, warm-hearted, Christian people, totally without bitterness. But their Bishop will not be there. He, like so many others, including the theologian Jim Packer, has been 'removed' by an intolerant 'liberalism'. On the other hand, the bishop of a Canadian diocese (New Westminster) cited in the Windsor Report, having applied legislation for same sex blessings in some churches in his diocese, will be there. Plus, the two or more Bishops from California who have just affirmed the same way forward these past weeks.

The actual end result is that, far from what it might appear on the media, the majority of bishops who have not been invited are not the 'liberals', but 'conservatives' who have provided alternative oversight, most of whom are based in African churches, through organizations such as CANA and AMiA.

Well, then, why go at all; why did I say 'yes' to Lambeth?

I must admit, it doesn't altogether make logical sense. But I have taken the jump for several reasons:

- (a) *I am not generally an 'opter-out'*. I believe you can only influence by being there, and I want to engage, with the people and issues concerned.
- (b) *I want to stand in solidarity* with my eleven brother-bishops in the Church of Ireland, who will be there (we have freed each other to make our own decisions); also with our link brother-bishops of Albany (Bill Love), Maridi (Justin Badi) and Southern Cone (Greg Venables) who will all be there. We send greetings from Down & Dromore to these three bishops.
- (c) *I believe it could well be in the interest of some to destroy the Lambeth Conference* as an instrument of communion, and to take away its moral authority, and I don't want in way to be party to that.
- (d) *I want to be involved in the one area which we know the Lambeth Conference will discuss*: the proposed Anglican Covenant. I believe it is vital to get this one right if it is to be part of the healing, unifying and safeguarding of the Communion.
- (e) I've put it like this: *'I'm prepared to give it another chance'*. If I'm honest, I do not see how our Communion will, or can, hold together with people going more and more out on a limb. I am aware that such people are creating disunity within the Communion and ecumenical distress with other churches, and concern in other churches who relate to us. **But I don't want to give up hope, just yet!**

In the light of all of that, I will spend three weeks in Lambeth with Liz from 15 July to 3 August (if we can survive that long!). But I have also decided to find ways of hearing the voices of those who cannot be there, and of taking those fully into account as well, and I have yet to decide on my precise level of participation.

While all of this is happening, many of you will be on holidays. Might I ask, not formally but passionately, that you pray fervently for our beloved and much valued Communion, and especially for the Archbishop of Canterbury, during those three weeks, which are bound to be pivotal in the history of Anglicanism?

+ *Harold*
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