

Diocese of Down and Dromore
Diocesan Synod, 24 June 2021 – Presidential Address

At this, my first Diocesan Synod as your Bishop, I welcome you to this, another first, a Diocesan Synod online. Like most of the other firsts of the past 17 months it is not quite how I would have planned it, but Covid-19 has impacted all our lives.

Our first thoughts and prayers must be with those who lost loved ones to this virus – families bereaved either directly by Covid or indirectly as a result of the pressures on our health service. Our prayers too are with those whose wellbeing, income, livelihood and lives have suffered in a multitude of ways and are still being affected by the events of the past year and a half.

However, the church is a community where faith, hope and love triumph and they triumph because of the Cross, they triumph because of the empty tomb, because of the glorious ascension, because of the gift of the Holy Spirit and because of the promised return of Jesus, when He will come again to judge the living and the dead and usher in fully His kingdom. We believe in God the Father, we believe in Jesus Christ, and we believe in the Holy Spirit. Now in June 2021 in today's world, in today's Ireland, in today's church, in today's Diocese of Down and Dromore, we cannot afford to ignore the plan that Jesus chose for the renewal of society. The late David Watson whose ministry deeply impacted this diocese 40 years ago said this:

“Jesus came with no political manifesto. He rejected all thoughts of violence. He shunned all positions of influence in public life. His plan, which was to change the history of the world in a way that has never been equaled, was astonishingly simple. He drew around him a small band of dedicated disciples, for the most part of three years he lived with them, shared with them, cared for them, taught them and loved them to the end. They on their part, sometimes failed him, hurt him, disappointed him, and sinned against him. Yet never once did he withdraw his love from them, and later empowered by the promised Holy Spirit, this group of trained disciples turned the world of their day upside down.”

In our day many voices clamor to be heard. Sometimes it feels like he who shouts loudest wins. Not so in the ways of God's Kingdom. There are ways to ensure we make the main things the main thing. I suggest three:

1. Making Christian disciples – people who will follow Jesus all their lives.
2. Raising up, releasing and the empowering of Christian leaders who will lead like Jesus and lead people to Jesus.
3. Birthing new Christian ministries and even new Christian churches.

As your bishop, at my first Diocesan Synod, I want to say clearly that I am inviting our parishes, this synod and our diocese to the work of:

1. Discipleship
2. Leadership
3. Apostleship

Discipleship

I begin with a word of thanks to everyone who creatively continued the work of making disciples during both lockdowns and in the periods in between - from daily teaching online to services online to Zoom gatherings to open air gatherings. This creativity is something not to lose but to continue as we move forward.

Regardless of where society around us is at, the Great Commission and command of Jesus to make disciples always remains at the centre of the church's task. Nothing negates that, not lockdown, not Covid-19, not apparent lack of finance - quite literally 'in sickness and in health', the command of Christ to His Church in every age and in all circumstances and in every place is to make disciples.

A disciple is someone who believes the gospel of Jesus Christ, someone shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ and someone who continues all their days to grow in their life of discipleship as obedient followers of Jesus Christ.

Over the coming years I as bishop will work tirelessly in every way that I can, encouraging and enabling you as clergy, vestries, people and diocesan staff and volunteers to do all that we can together - in the strength of God the Holy Spirit and in obedience to God's word. Our calling is to make disciples, to make new disciples and also to enable all of us to grow in our walk with God. God calls us to know Him more, to love Him more and to better live for Him day by day.

What does discipleship look like in a local parish context?

Firstly, all parishes need:

1. Points of entry - that will seek out and find those who have questions about possibly commencing a journey of belief and discipleship. We must go looking for those outside the church who want to discover if following Jesus might be an option for them. Every parish in Down and Dromore should aim to run at least twice every year, a course that can bring people to faith in Jesus Christ - an Alpha or Christianity Explored Course or something similar. This is no longer optional in today's world and today's church.

Secondly, all parishes need to have in place:

2. Places of growth - home groups, or life groups or a mid-week bible teaching programme where the principals of spiritual formation are taught. Every parish needs to teach their people how to study the bible, how to pray, how to give, how to serve and how to live out their Christian discipleship in every aspect of their lives. We must not only teach people what we ought to do, but also how to do it!

Thirdly, every parish should encourage their people to be:

3. A people of generosity, in terms of our time, our talents and our treasures. Our new Church Growth Officer, Keith Gardiner, will make available a short course for parishes to use to help people think about living a generous life. We'll hear from Keith later on today.

Fourthly, encouraging the people in our parishes to be:

4. People who read the bible for themselves. Every parish needs to look at how we provide resources to help them with this, such as a programme to read through the bible every year or two years. As a diocese we want to encourage people to connect with God's word, so that it guides every aspect of our lives. During my first confirmation season I have encouraged all the candidates that one of the essentials for living the Christian life is to stay close to God's word – and indeed for all of us, this is one of the most important habits of Christian discipleship to establish.

Fifthly:

5. Praying often for a fresh outpouring and infilling of the Holy Spirit into our individual lives and the life of our church communities. He, the Holy Spirit, makes new disciples, renews and empowers his disciples and increases God's work in our lives all of our days.

Making Christian disciples need to be at the very top of our agenda as we move forward. I have mentioned some key elements of this work:

1. Christian discovery courses such as Alpha.
2. Home Groups and mid-week bible study groups.
3. A diocesan-wide programme that focuses on generosity.
4. A focus on people reading the bible on a daily basis.
5. Prayer that expects God's presence to transform lives and transform communities.

Making Disciples has to be at the top of our church's agenda so that we in today's church and today's world embrace the call of Jesus Christ on our lives.

Again, David Watson wrote, "*The call to obey, to serve, to live a simple lifestyle, to suffer and if need be, to die is common to all those who claim to be followers of Jesus.*"

That privilege is ours as it was the privilege of the twelve.

Leadership

I begin by thanking everyone in all of our parishes lay and ordained who have exercised leadership over the last eighteen months.

What is striking in every book of the Bible is how God raises up men and women and empowers, equips and enables them to lead.

From Abraham, leaving the place of his birth to go to a place he did not know in obedience to the call of God, through to John in the book of the Revelation as an old man still hearing the voice of God and speaking out prophetically the word of God, the qualities of godly leadership jump at us from the pages of scripture. Leaders with the resilience of Joseph. Even though he was sold into slavery, he became prime minister of Egypt and then hearing from God and in obedience to God rescued the future of God's own people from famine and

destruction. The leaders in scripture included those who had been doctors like Luke, financial geniuses like Matthew the tax collector, fishermen like James and John and Andrew and Peter, and even former persecutors of the Church like Saul.

Over these next years this diocese must raise up more leaders.

We need to raise up leaders from every background and every part of society in our diocese.

The church needs to identify those upon whom God is placing his hand. We need to encourage, equip and empower them to lead God's people, God's church and God's world – in God's ways and to God's glory.

Here is my dream, my hope, my prayer, and my intent:

Each year for the next ten years that together we see from the Diocese of Down and Dromore:

1. Ten people accepted each year for training for the Ordained ministry through the different pathways available.
 - Full-time training for stipendiary ministry.
 - Part-time training for stipendiary ministry.
 - Training for Ordained Local Ministry.
 - Training for Pioneer Ministry.
2. A new church plant leader identified, trained and released to plant a new church every year.

That within 10 years we will have:

1. At least one commissioned Diocesan Lay Reader available to serve in every church and church plant in the diocese.
2. At least one commissioned Diocesan Evangelist available to serve in every church and church plant in the diocese.
3. In our diocese we will double the number of youth and children's paid staff workers from 24 to 48 after five years and triple that number to 72 after ten years.
4. That we put in place our own Diocesan Year-out ministry apprentice scheme. Tim Burns has begun to explore how best to develop this.
5. That we have in every church, one volunteer parish visitor for every fifty families on church records to assist the ordained clergy and other staff in the task of pastoral care and visitation of the people of the parish.
6. An adequate number of Sunday School Teachers to staff Sunday schools in every church and church plant in the diocese.

7. Fifty family support workers or outreach workers or other lay workers, recruited and trained for paid and voluntary lay roles across the diocese.

8. New training and support for select vestries in matters of charity governance.

9. At least one Wellbeing volunteer recruited and trained for every church in the diocese to act as champions for people's wellbeing in our parishes.

Let's raise up leaders who will serve God, serve His church serve people and serve communities.

- Let's identify, train, release and support men and women for leadership who walk a close walk with Jesus.
- Who live under the authority of God's word, and who all their lives continue to be filled more and more with the Holy Spirit.
- Who repent quickly when they sin.
- Who die daily to themselves, taking up the cross and who follow Jesus as Lord.
- Men and women who serve faithfully and who live a life sustained by prayer.
- And who love the church and value being part of the family of God locally and globally.

We will prioritise leadership in the years ahead.

Apostleship

Even during lockdown and a worldwide pandemic we have initiated new ministries, planted new churches, employed new staff and put in place new initiatives. Thank you to everyone who has exercised apostolic type leadership in these ways.

As it was in the days of the early church, it is again a time in history when the church must courageously and lovingly speak truth to power. These are days when we need to equip everyone, laity and clergy, young people and more seasoned parishioners, all our leaders at parish and at diocesan level - to speak into the vacuums in society that a silent church and an impotent church would allow other voices to fill. We follow and serve a God who is full of grace and truth, for whom issues of justice and truth matter. Today's world needs a church that will demonstrate in practical ways God's grace and kindness, a church that addresses issues of poverty, of justice and of social need, while at the same time proclaiming clearly the good news of the gospel through saving faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

We need to take seriously the issues of sectarianism and racism. It is now 23 years on from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the church here in Down and Dromore needs to address the continuing problem of racism and the problem of sectarianism. It is not good enough that we occasionally issue statements that condemn sectarianism and condemn racist attacks and attitudes. We must find appropriate and even prophetic ways of speaking God's reconciling love into those communities most affected. This will involve further church planting in the communities most impacted, as well as setting up appropriate projects in these communities which will address the legacy of our past and ongoing resistance to reconciliation in our present.

The past year has also highlighted for us all the challenge of the mental health and wellbeing of so many in our parishes and in our society. The Church simply cannot be absent from the conversations about supporting people's mental wellbeing. We have so much to offer through the good news of the Gospel. This issue is one that we will increasingly engage with in the years ahead. I am very grateful that Tim Burns has begun to research appropriate first steps for our churches.

There are the old, vexed issues that have long hung over our church and all of society. Issues such as abortion where the church's pro-life voice must be more than matched by a louder cry and more focused intent in supporting women during their pregnancy, whether planned or unplanned, whether wanted or unwanted whether traumatic and painful or a time of joy and celebration.

Likewise, the church's voice on marriage must increasingly include proper marriage preparation, marriage support and care for those for who choose to remain single.

I would like us to become what too often what we are not, that is a church that is as full of grace as we are full of truth. That like the apostles of the first century we would courageously, regardless of the personal cost, speak truth to power. By this I mean that we need to graciously speak biblical truth and practically demonstrate the love of Christ in the communities and parishes where God has placed us.

In addition, over the next years let's rise to the apostolic challenge and ensure that:

1. Every church in the diocese has at least one community engagement project.
2. Every church in our diocese has an active, healthy, Sunday school that meets weekly. Pre-lockdown we had 74 Sunday schools, post lockdown by September we will have 81. We have 111 church buildings and 6 church plants with the number of church plants increasing. Every church and church plant needs an active healthy Sunday school.
3. Every church in our diocese having an active, healthy, youth fellowship that meets weekly.
4. We plant at least one new worshipping congregation in the diocese each year.
5. That the diocese would encourage and identify at least one parish every year to become what were once called 'minister churches' or in more modern speak, 'resource churches'. That in our diocese we have ten churches that would resource and support other less resourced churches to grow and move towards their fuller potential.

Like the apostles in the New Testament, we move forward prioritising evangelism as the life blood of the church, preaching and teaching the air that we breathe, pastoral care and healing, our hands and our feet, in every way doing the work the apostles did.

We build, we rebuild, we move forward believing in the God of the one true holy catholic and apostolic church, a church that is built on discipleship, leadership and apostleship on a sure and solid foundation, the rock who is Jesus Christ. Thank you.

Rt Revd David McClay
Bishop of Down and Dromore