

The Diocese of Down and Dromore Diocesan Synod
Thursday 19 June 2025

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The Rt Revd David McClay
Bishop of Down and Dromore

Welcome

I welcome you warmly to our Diocesan Synod 2025.

A warm welcome to all diocesan clergy and parish delegates. A particular welcome to our visitors and guests.

A few weeks ago, while visiting the parishes of Killinchy and Kilmood, the Reverend Stanley Gamble kindly gave me a book, “The Charges and Addresses of JC Ryle,” first bishop of Liverpool from 1880 until he retired on 1st February 1900 aged eighty-five. I packed this book along with some others into my case before Hilary and I headed off on a week’s holiday. I read and found compelling Ryle’s addresses and charges to his diocese over 20 years. Many things struck me but in a general sense I was struck at how in each address he would first address his diocese and then secondly move on to reference wider issues of the day in the church nationally and in the world. It is my intention in this address to review some of our work and ministry in this our Diocese of Down and Dromore and our parishes, but also to speak of our place and our calling in how we relate and play our part in the wider church and today’s world.

Thank you

But first let me on my own behalf and yours thank our very hard-working Diocesan team where work is resulting in lives being transformed and our church being resourced for their calling.

Our Archdeacon of Down Jim Cheshire

Our Archdeacon of Dromore Mark Harvey

Our Diocesan Secretary Mr Roy Lawther

Our new since last year Diocesan Finance Manager, Mrs Claire Neill

Our Administration and Finance Officer, Mrs Kelly McCullough

Our Diocesan Development Officer Mr Andrew Brannigan

Our Diocesan Growth and Fundraising Officer Mr Keith Gardiner

Our Diocesan Communication Officer Mrs Annette McGrath

Our Diocesan Youth Officer Mr Josh Thornbury

Our Diocesan Children’s Development Officer Mrs Millie Bellew

Our Safeguarding and Compliance Officer Mrs Jane Beaney

Mrs Janine Armstrong our FORGE Co-Ordinator, who is moving on from that role now that the funding is coming to an end.

Mr Josh Hooker who has been seconded to us from Crosslinks these past years and who is returning to serve God overseas.

My PA, Mrs Tracey Taggart

And, by far and by no means least, my wife and best friend, Hilary.

Discipleship, Leadership and Apostleship

Looking back since our Synod in 2024 we have as a Diocese continued to resource parishes and church plants in all three areas of our diocesan priorities. These are Discipleship, Leadership and Apostleship. Our focus on these is essentially laying foundations for growth, and for keeping faithfulness to Christ and faithfulness to the Gospel at the centre, as the heartbeat in the life of our Diocese and local church communities. The church when true to her calling is always Christ centred, cross shaped, faithful in the

proclamation of God's word. It's missional and evangelistic in its daily work and is passionate about reaching the lost, making disciples and building churches full of the Holy Spirit and faith who will seek above all God's glory.

Overseas Partners

The churches task is to go into all the world taking the Gospel to the nations. At last year's Diocesan Synod, we were joined by Bishop Leo and his wife Honey from our link diocese of Multan in Pakistan. Aware that they and many others suffer in a nation where Christians face persecution we stand with them in prayer. We were particularly concerned at the recent attacks on Pakistan from India. A monthly Zoom prayer gathering enables anyone who serves in any of our parishes to be involved and to join our brothers and sisters in Pakistan in prayer via Zoom. To find out more please contact Denise Wilson.

Regarding our link with Maridi in South Sudan— I was privileged to visit our link diocese of Maridi last year and a further team from our diocese visited last autumn. We look forward, God willing and visa permitting, to welcoming a small team - Bishop Moses and Mama Rejoice, Pastor Godfrey the Principal of Haddow Primary School and Pastor Tito the Clinical Officer and Diocesan Evangelist Team Leader - to visit us this autumn. This nation and its church have this past year witnessed scenes of violence from the hands of Islamic terrorists. Our partnership with this diocese is something our brothers and sisters in Maridi treasure. The team of four will be with us, we hope, from 17th September until 7th October - three Sundays with mid-week events currently being planned and to which all parishes are invited.

Our link with Santiago Diocese in Chile continues to gain momentum. It was such a privilege, along with the Revd Mark Lennox, to represent Down and Dromore at the ordination of Juan Estaban Saravia as the new diocesan bishop of Santiago. It was a wonderful service of blessing as we gathered with other bishops from other South American dioceses, the Anglican Church in North America, ACNA, a bishop who represented the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Anglican Convocation in Europe and others. We now follow up on the many conversations and look forward to a fruitful partnership, especially in terms of evangelism in both our dioceses.

These diocesan links are crucial at a time of turmoil when the church in the West needs increasingly to be aligned with the orthodoxy and the evangelistic fervour we find in 80% of Anglicanism worldwide but often absent in the liberal western church. The Gospel is so needed in our world, not least in Israel and Gaza where much by way of financial aid to help the injured, especially children, has been raised through Bishops Appeal. The war in Ukraine continues to impact the lives of so many. We pray for a just end to wars in these days. We as a Diocese are providing an opportunity for parishes to contribute financially to the work of Tear Fund in the areas affected and also the diocese of Jerusalem. Parishes are encouraged to consider having a special offering towards this relief work on either Sundays 22 or 29 June.

Connecting Missionally with Parishes in Ireland

Some time back I mentioned that I want us to begin having links with orthodox parishes in our dioceses south of the border. Please discuss this with me or either Archdeacon. We will in the year ahead begin moving this forward.

I would like every parish in Down and Dromore who has a passion to see people saved and come to Christ partnering with orthodox parishes in mission and in evangelism in strategic ways with reaching the lost together as our goal.

Youth and Children's Work

Investing resources of time and money, expertise and prayer, teaching, and gifting into making disciples for Jesus of children, young people and young adults has continued to be high on our agenda. Millie Bellew has continued to come alongside parishes and church plants in establishing new Sunday Schools, strengthening existing children's ministries, setting up crèches in parishes to enable young families to worship. Our statistics showed that out of 111 churches only sixty-eight had any children baptised in 2024. Parents are

choosing and will continue to choose some of the newer churches if our clergy, select vestries and parishes are not investing in having good quality children's ministry in place, which should always include a good Sunday School, a well-run crèche, good resources, teachers and leaders that are committed and passionate and facilities suitable for children's ministry. Other families simply get lost to Christ if this basic work of ministry to children, young people and families is not prioritised. Parishes can spend large sums of money on other projects, some necessary, some questionable, with often a pittance invested into children's and youth ministries. We do however celebrate the substantial number of parishes with a new Sunday school often after decades without any Sunday ministry with children. New youth fellowship groups are also emerging across our diocese. We celebrate the advances made but much remains to be put in place in other parishes.

Last summer – the Diocese hosted three youth Kilbroney camps:

Senior Camp – 26 to 30 July 2024 – Speaker Mark Wells

Junior Camp -1 to 5 August 2024 – Speaker Kerry Connolly

Middle Camp – 7 to 11 August 2024 – Speaker Joel Martin

These camps were attended by 120 young people and 40 young leaders under the age of 25.

We had significant numbers of young people attending Summer Madness, and significant numbers of people of all ages but especially families at the New Wine Ireland family holiday week in Sligo.

Bright Parish Church was the most beautiful setting for an event to celebrate the work of those who serve as Sunday School teachers. The very first Church of Ireland Sunday School in Ireland had been held in Bright in 1774 and we marked this with a fun event in that beautiful setting where some of the most recently formed new Sunday schools 250 years later were marking their new beginning.

We celebrate and thank the many who work often as volunteers with our children and young people. Our Children's and Youth Departments have continued to resource our volunteers as well as paid youth and children's workers.

The Church of Ireland Census

The central church's annual census over the coming years will help us map what is helping us grow; grow in each of our parishes both in depth of commitment to church and numerical growth. We measure what matters, we count people because people count and unless people are reached for Christ and saved by his cross and empty tomb when they repent and believe and receive Christ they die without Christ and go out into a lost eternity in hell. We are called to shepherd the flock and seek out every lost sheep that lives in our parishes. This is our task.

Regarding discipleship in general. I am heartened and encouraged at how parishes are putting in place the essential structures to reach and disciple young and old. A few parishes are still failing to put in place the basics. Where this is happening generations are being lost and we do not fulfil the basics of what is the cure of souls.

These basics include a way in, regular Alpha or alternatively an Exploring Christianity course or similar course in every parish. Having recently attended the Alpha Conference in the Royal Albert Hall, London, attended by over 2500 from these islands and a further 2500 from eighty-two nations, these course work. People need invited to these courses and to our churches. When invited the evidence is clear many will come, and we fail them when this is not happening. I pray that our *Speak Jesus* initiative will begin to ensure that the many, actually by far the majority of people who live in our parishes and who are not in any church, are invited, welcomed and given opportunities to follow Jesus. This is our calling, this is what we signed up for to lead our people into when we were ordained deacon, priest or bishop. Let me quote Ryle, "her aim, this is our the church's aim should be to produce such a state of things that no one shall be able to say 'I am

no man's parishioner', I am never visited or spoken to, no one cares for my soul." Hell is real we are clergy and people entrusted with the cure of souls of the people who live in our parishes.

Many of you will have heard of the silent revival that many are referencing. A survey by the Bible Society shows regular church going in the UK of those aged 18-24 in 2018 was 4% of the population, by 2024 had risen to 16% with one-fifth of men aged 18-24, 21%, attending church monthly. Similarly, people of all ages are coming to faith in Christ especially Gen Z young men and women but very significantly young men. In our Diocese I am hearing these stories.

Another sign of God's Spirit at work is that bible sales are significantly up. Every parish should have bibles you can give away. What is striking is that people often ring up a local church asking is it ok if they begin to come along. The church is often seen by those with no connection to be a club that you need permission to attend. For God's sake and for the sake of the lost get the word out that people are invited and we want them to turn up at our parish churches. Please ensure every home in our parishes has a leaflet delivered that says, 'come as you are'. Banners outside our churches that say people can come as they are should also be considered along with good clear warm and invitational notice boards outside all our church buildings.

Making disciples also calls for parishes to gather their people together to pray for their parish its homes, its people, its schools, its civic and business life, its needs, its social challenges, its people who follow Christ and those who still don't know Him. JC Ryle -

"He kept us alive in the middle of the last century when the blindness of our spiritual rulers had shut the Methodists out of the Church. What He has done in time past He may do again. For this let us all agree to pray. A praying, interceding people are the very backbone of a Church."

Disciple making calls for us to have in place bible teaching that is ongoing to bring all God's people to maturity. Check out some of the many good bible study resources available at our resource stand.

As a Diocese we resource parishes to equip our people for discipleship and also for leadership. A list of some of the training courses are in the small brochure on your seats. Also, we are as a Diocese asking parishes to put into the hand of many this Anglican Catechism edited by J I Packer.

I am pleased that Alan McCluggage from One-to-One is with us today and he will address Synod later.

Vacant Parishes

In just over two years we have seen 21 vacancies filled. These include Ardmore, Knockngoney, Killyleagh, Seapatrick, St Donards, Tullylish, Groomsport, Kilmore and Inch, LAMP, Ballywalter, Kilmegan and Maghera, Clonallon and Warrenpoint with Kilbroney, Helen's Bay, Knocknamuckley, Upper and Lower Kilwarlin, Belvoir, Magheradroll, Dundonald and Annalong. In addition, now Stormont and Ballymacarrett.

At the most recent Selection Conference where from across all of Ireland eleven in total were selected, seven were from the Diocese of Down and Dromore. We have 30 currently in the Exploring Ministry Group and have one OLM deacon and OLM priest in training.

Last September we had five people ordained as stipendiary deacons. On Sunday past six were ordained as priests, the previous week one deacon and we also have one OLM deacon and one OLM Priest being ordained this year.

Last year I announced that we would be partnering with Holy Trinity Brompton and plant a new church in Ballymacarrett. I am delighted today to confirm that very recently the Reverend Mike Darbandi has been appointed to lead this new Resource Church Plant. Mike comes to us from Gas Street HTB plant in Birmingham and will be arriving in 2026.

The work of finding clergy for vacant parishes has been a mammoth but exciting task that has involved endless work by Diocesan Council members, Permanent Commission members visiting parishes, countless Boards of Nomination, diocesan and parish nominators working with me as bishop to find godly leaders who like those in Acts 6, 'are of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom who as Paul extorted Timothy will rightly handle the word of truth, who will preach the word, who will do the work of an evangelist, who will under God faithfully fulfil the ministry entrusted to them'.

We continue this work, though the numbers of parishes becoming vacant due to retirements in our diocese is reducing.

A very significant event in the life of our diocese is the biannual residential clergy and leaders conference. Held in January past in the Sligo Park Hotel we were challenged to embrace and hold fast to a ministry that is truly biblical, outwardly missional and one where we as leaders finish strong. Our speakers all challenged and encouraged us in this privileged call of God.

The theme of leadership continued to be one that our parishes were in a refreshing way encouraged on St Patrick's Day to fully own. Taking us to both Barnabas and St Patrick as examples of godly missional leadership. His Honour David Turner, from All Souls Langham Place in London gave us an address that sent all of us back to our parishes, I trust even more convinced of our need, to raise up godly leaders to lead our parishes and our church in Ireland forward with the gospel at its heart and with passion in our lives to take that gospel to our own nation and to the nations of the earth.

I was thrilled that just a few weeks ago seven people, five men and two women from Down and Dromore were selected for training at the Church of Ireland Theological Institute, a total of eight new students from Down and Dromore will commence training for ordination at CITI this September. I am grateful to the Reverend Karen Salmon and the Reverend Simon Genoe for their encouragement and help in this work.

Following information evenings and a lot of guidance from Andrew Brannigan our Development Officer and the Reverend Willie Nixon, our Warden for Diocesan Lay Readers, eight people were commissioned as Diocesan Lay Readers. Four are currently in training.

Eleven people were commissioned as Diocesan Bible Teachers and Catechists. This is a new and exciting initiative.

We continue to seek out people with the gifting and calling to train as Diocesan Evangelists. Currently we have twelve in training, and one was commissioned since our last diocesan synod. Diocesan Evangelists are key to church growth. They empower and equip others to reach those who do not know Christ. This task must be front and central in the life of any diocese.

The T3 Conference Centre at Vic-Ryn has become a place of encouragement for us as a Diocese. Our church plant leaders and pioneers meet there monthly for bible teaching and guidance in various aspects of leading a church plant or establishing a fresh expression of church.

Vic-Ryn is also a regular meeting point for a growing number of clergy and others who have been appointed to churches where church growth needs to happen and happen quickly within a five-year window of opportunity for growth. We are grateful for this resource made freely available to us as a diocese. The first of those in training under the new all Ireland Pioneer Leadership training were commissioned in November. Four from Down and Dromore were commissioned in Newry to serve in various pioneer initiatives. Tim Burns for the Suitcase Project, Natalie Trainor to plant a new congregation in Newry and Lorraine and Nevin Anderson to plant a new worshipping community in Warrenpoint. We in Down and Dromore have been planting new churches and putting in place new pioneer initiatives in more recent years. However, the Church of Christ has been planting new churches since the first day of the early church. The challenges and opportunities today are such that every church in our diocese should embrace church planting

as part of who we are as a diocesan family committed to church planting – not leaving the work of planting new churches to the diocese or a few well-resourced churches – but creating a culture where the expectation is that every church, irrespective of their size or resources, participates in church planting.

For example:

1. **Pairing** with or adopting a church plant.
Inviting a church planter to share their church planting story at Sunday services and in newsletters.
Praying for the church plant and their leader regularly and including them in their prayer calendars.
Visiting a church plant to encourage them.
2. Becoming a **Patron** for a church plant.
Lending equipment for events.
Sharing volunteers for outreach projects.
Donating regularly to a church plant.
Special offerings for a church plant.
3. **Planting** or **parenting** one or more new churches.
Raising up and sending out new church plant leaders.
Developing a volunteer team to go with the church plant leader.
Financially supporting and overseeing the new church.

In the Diocese of Down and Dromore we have three covenant churches with our Methodist brothers and sisters. These are the church on the Hill in Maghaberry, a covenant congregation since 2014, Movilla Abbey in Newtownards and Bangor Primacy. For those unfamiliar with covenant churches, these have been for many years Church of Ireland congregations and methodist congregations meeting at different times in shared buildings. During Covid and since Covid the congregations in Movilla Abbey and in Primacy have come together as one, as joint Church of Ireland and Methodist congregations. Revd Alan Peek is now the joint Church of Ireland and Methodist minister in Movilla Abbey and currently Denise Wilson is the lay leader of the joint congregation in Bangor Primacy.

As a diocese we have made the decision to find a new diocesan resource and office space within the budget available to us as a result of the monies that are the Down and Dromore portion from the sale of Church House. It will be a resource building and so we are exercising care to find the most suitable space to meet our requirements to help in resourcing the growth and development of our congregations and parishes in Down and Dromore.

Lent Devotions

It's encouraging as I visit parishes to have parishioners of all ages express thanks for the daily devotional talks on the letters to the seven churches in Revelation with readings that took us through the whole book of Revelation and prayers into local parish life around the themes of discipleship, leadership and apostleship. I prepared these while staying with my 92-year-old mother for a week last August to allow my sister to have a holiday week in sunnier climes.

The Bible Course

The numbers attending this course have grown very substantially under Josh and Cathy Hooker's leadership. We pray God's blessing upon them as they soon return to Namibia. We are putting in place a team to lead this important work forward.

The Church of Ireland and our mission today.

Thus far I have been addressing the opportunities and the challenges, the things to press into and the things to give God thanks for in the life of our Diocese of Down and Dromore. These have strayed into the life of

the wider Church of Ireland. Let me now take a few minutes to focus on our branch of the Christian church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland.

While God is moving in these islands much of the Church of Ireland, local parishes, local churches the length and breadth of Ireland remain untouched.

Where God is at work in his church today there is:

1. Certainty around doctrine, God's word the bible is clearly taught.
2. The generation we call Gen Z, young adults find a home where worship is vibrant, there is integrity and where the Christian faith works in transforming lives and lifestyles.
3. All generations including infants, children and teenagers are highly valued and provided for and where young adults are given their voice alongside every other generation.
4. Evangelism and calling people of all ages to repentance and faith in Jesus is the church's daily bread.

Tragically, too often across our Church of Ireland the soundbite that comes from too many in leadership and central church tells us that decline is inevitable.

That simply isn't true and is not what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church and not what God is doing. Increasingly, there is a new emerging hope. We give thanks that central church is putting some money into five pioneering initiatives annually. I am chair of the committee that is taking this forward, but it is only a small part of a much larger task of equipping every parish to put Christ at the centre and go for growth. We welcome that central church is now financing 50% of the cost of curates and has increased grants to student training for ordination at CITI in Dublin but we need many more men and women - with a further 150 clergy of our total of 430 approximately expected to retire in the next 8 years and 80 vacancies in all of Ireland as I speak. We need to pray for our wider Church of Ireland. Every parish needs to see the need to reach the lost. With less than 1% of the population in any Church of Ireland church on a Sunday we should not be threatened by anyone church planting. There are more than enough people left for all of us to reach. We need to position ourselves in furthering the Gospel through partnering with others in mission and evangelism. We need too to be fearless by challenging the church where it chooses to depart from the Gospel of Christ as the church has received it. Please pray that I as your bishop will always fearlessly challenge the wider church when necessary as I believed was necessary a week ago today in relation to the weekend of activities in Christ Church Cathedral Dublin that gave rise to deep concern and was clearly a deeply concerning departure from the historic faith and established discipline of the Church of Ireland. I repeat however again what I said then:

“We consider it pure joy however, to align ourselves with Anglicans across the world who hold to the teachings of the bible as we have received it.”

In Down and Dromore we need to take seriously our representation on committees of central church, the Standing Committee and the Representative Church Body, and always have our full quota of representatives present at General Synod.

The new churches in Ireland, and we thank God for them, are reaching some of the lost. God will build his church with or without local Church of Ireland parishes. We have the buildings, we have much by way of resources, we simply need the will to join in with what God is doing in seeking and saving the lost, prioritising reaching the lost, ensuring our goals around discipleship, leadership and apostleship.

I recently had the privilege of attending the European Congress on Evangelism hosted by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Every country in Europe was represented and every denomination also represented. A recent Analysis of Billy Graham's preaching through which over two million people are known to have come to faith in Jesus, four phrases emerged that Billy Graham used continually and consistently in his long years of evangelistic work, phrases that still have the ring of truth today's world need to hear and be impacted by:

The Bible says:

You must be born again.

Come as you are.

Jesus is the answer.

1. The bible says that the thousands in our parishes need us to call them home to trust in Christ.
2. You must be born again – unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

We must take this challenge to the ends of the earth and Speak Jesus in our own parishes to every man, woman, boy and girl. At the Conference Will Graham, Billy Graham's grandson, gave one of many talks. Now, realise this was a conference of 1500 church leaders. He said he would be failing the church if he did not give the opportunity for those there to repent and believe the Gospel. You know there were at least three that stood in response to the invitation. My dear friends, clergy, and synod representatives – make certain you are born again – you must be born again.

3. Come as you are – all can come to Jesus in repentance and faith and there is no other way to heaven or to know God. Let that message be one our churches are making clear to every home and every person in our cure of souls in our parishes – come as you are.

And finally,

4. Jesus is the answer. The answer to the searching hearts of many in our parishes, the answer to our tumultuous confused and war-torn world. He alone is the way the truth and the life. He is the answer.

Our church would do well to make these our regular catch phrases as we proclaim Christ and His Gospel faithfully. We as a Diocese are committed to the strengthening of our church for Gospel ministry and the planting of new congregations. May all of us be faithful to our calling. This Gospel that changes us and changes all who repent and believe is pure and has the power to make the world reflect God's purity and holiness. It's still the power of God for salvation to those who believe. I conclude with the words of Bishop Ryle:

“If she claims to be a territorial, and not a congregational Church, she should never rest till there is neither a street, nor a lane, nor a house, or a garret, nor a cellar, nor a family, which is not regularly looked after, and provided with the offer of means of grace by her officials,

. . . her aim should be to produce such a state of things, that no one shall be able to say, ‘I am no man's parishioner. I am never visited or spoken to: no one cares for my soul.’”

As I draw this address to a conclusion I wish to lead us as a synod in prayer. I often say that in the Church of Ireland the journey to real commitment to Christ and assurance of salvation is like moving from signing a document in pencil to taking out a fountain pen and making our commitment to following Church and living for him certain.

For any wanting to make that commitment certain I now would ask you to pray this prayer silently in your heart after me. (*Prayer*)

To all of us, I give today the opportunity to re-commit ourselves and our whole lives to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as we stand together now for prayer. (*Prayer*)