

Diocese of Down and Dromore Diocesan Synod, 23 June 2022 Presidential Address

This ought to have been our third Diocesan Synod under my leadership as bishop. But as we are now too well familiar with – Diocesan Synods in 2020 did not happen across our whole Church of Ireland due to the strict lockdowns and restrictions in 2020. In 2021 we did, I believe, make the most of what we could do and creatively held what was I hope a helpful Diocesan Synod online. This is however my first Diocesan Synod in real space. It is my joy, my privilege and absolute delight to welcome you to the Jethro Centre for this year’s Diocesan Synod.

It is very appropriate that we are meeting in this building – the story of Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law is significant. It speaks to us clearly of our three diocesan priorities - priorities more vital than ever to the health of our parishes as we put Covid-19 behind us.

Firstly, Discipleship.

We see the making of a disciple through Moses making clear to Jethro God’s saving work among his people. This message led Jethro to embrace for himself God’s saving grace and truth and expresses his commitment to God boldly and clearly.

Exodus 18:8-12

⁸ Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the LORD had delivered them. ⁹ And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians.

¹⁰ Jethro said, “Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. ¹¹ Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people.”^[d] ¹² And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

The story of Jethro also highlights our second priority as a diocese, **Leadership**. He makes clear the high priority that must be placed upon recognising, recruiting, and releasing others around us into leadership.

Exodus 18:21-23

²¹ Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands,

of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. ²² And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³ If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace.”

We need as we move forward to prioritise at parish level and at diocesan level, raising up leaders, women and men who are capable, able for the tasks that we need undertaken in our parishes and diocese. Jethro said to look for people with ability. They need to be people who not only have ability but put God first and who want to serve Him and do what God has gifted them for and called them to for His glory – people who fear God for character also always matters even more than competence, we need leaders who fear God and who are trustworthy, loyal, discreet and reliable.

And thirdly, Apostleship.

Our priority is that we raise up leaders who take us to places we haven't been before, who start new ministries, plant new churches that see birthed into God's kingdom new followers of Jesus Christ. In these verses Moses will lead the people forward in ways with which they had become unfamiliar during their years in Egypt. It's time for the church to now move forward in hope, full of faith, believing and knowing that God is able. It's His church and He wants His church to thrive.

We can learn much from what God is doing today in His world through His church. We will take forward our partnership with the church in South Sudan. It is my prayer that my visit to Lambeth this July and Kigali next April will lead to some new mission partnerships that will bless all of us in the years ahead.

Our calling is onward and forward. We cannot go back to Egypt. Well, we could, but we won't. So, let's look at our priorities as a diocese and where we are currently at.

Discipleship - Points of Entry

That every parish in our diocese should have points of entry, an Alpha or similar course lasting 6 to 10 weeks twice a year. I have asked all clergy in written correspondence to explore how they will make this happen, it's been focused on at our clergy days in the Stormont Hotel earlier this year, Select Vestries have been asked to provide a budget to cover the cost involved. Training in relation to Alpha will be provided during the week beginning 19 September.

I have heard stories of people coming to faith through these courses both in real space and online this past year.

Towards the end of 2022 we will ask all our parishes to provide feedback to date on progress in putting in place points of entry.

Places of Growth

Home groups, life groups, bible study groups are where people are equipped in bible literacy and given the tools to grow as disciples of Christ. Again, this priority has been highlighted for clergy in correspondence and at our clergy days in the Stormont Hotel. Vestries have been asked to ensure study materials are provided. This September Josh Hooker will run a five-week training course for new and existing small group bible study leaders.

Dates: 12, 19, 26 September, 3 and 10 October at 7.30pm each evening

Venue: Carryduff Church

Points of entry, places of growth and thirdly *becoming a people of generosity*. All our parishes need to have a plan as to how to increase their income. This always happens in two significant ways: more people giving to the work of our parishes and secondly people giving more. The following resources are now available to parishes having been prepared by Annette McGrath and Keith Gardiner:

1. My 10 Year Vision plan
2. Church Planting in Down and Dromore
3. Generosity – responding generously to a generous God
4. Making Giving Easier
5. Sourcing Funding – first steps
6. Invest in God’s Kingdom – leaving a legacy to His Church
7. Honouring the Memory – Giving to God’s church in memory of a loved one

Select Vestries and clergy have been provided with those resources. Parishes need now to use them, distributing them widely along with their parish magazines, posting them on parish websites and in other ways making them widely available. Plans are in hand to provide a four-week Generosity video course to parishes. This course will be made available in the autumn of this year.

Next, disciples are always *people who read the bible every day*. Parishes have been asked to make it widely known that the Daily Office, which includes a short version for personal use of Morning or/and Evening Prayer with daily bible readings are easily accessible on their parish websites and other usual media outlets. This resource can also be accessed by all on both our Diocesan Website and the Church of Ireland website. A resource known as the ‘Immerse’ Bible Reading resource was promoted and made available for clergy to consider at the Clergy Days in the Stormont Hotel earlier in the year. A leaflet for parishes on Bible Reader resources is being developed by Josh Hooker. Other bible reading plans for 2023 will be made available by Josh to parishes this year.

Prayer - praying for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit

Following our three Diocesan Prayer events parishes are now asked to put in place regular opportunities for mid-week prayer gatherings and Select Vestries have been asked to prioritise prayer in their work moving forward. Parishes need to provide regular opportunities that gather people together to intercede for the needs of their communities, our churches, the diocese, our nation and the world.

Leadership - Ordained Leaders

Our goal is that we are putting forward 10 new people in whatever way for ordination every year. Last year four were accepted for full-time training. This year two were accepted for full-time training and one for OLM training with currently two people who trained outside Ireland returning to ministry posts in our diocese, so five this year. We have a distance to go. We are barely 50% there. Voices beyond our diocese tell us we have enough people in training as parishes cannot afford curates. With 172 Clergy due to retire in the next ten years we cannot afford not to raise up women and men for ordained ministry. Our parishes need a culture that releases people to serve. Since our last Synod I have appointed two new Directors of Ordinands, the Reverend Simon Genoe and the Reverend Karen Salmon, who gather together those exploring ordination and are available to meet with those thinking about and praying through what might be a call to ordination. We recently, on 29th May, had a special Vocations Sunday with resources including a sermon online being made available to all parishes. There is still the opportunity for parishes to post this sermon on their social media channels and websites. Clergy come from our parishes and our parishes need to be fostering vocations at all levels.

At least one Lay Reader in every parish

In recent years we have seen a lot of lay readers trained and released to serve in our parishes. Our lay readers are an incredible resource and the life blood in some of our parishes giving endless hours voluntarily. A considerable number of our diocesan lay readers have moved to help in parishes where they are needed most. We continue to look for others to serve as lay readers at every appropriate opportunity. We have in total 84 Diocesan Lay Readers. On 29 June seven new lay readers will be commissioned. This will bring our total number of Diocesan lay readers to 70 and 14 emeritus readers, some of whom remain very active. We will be having another recruitment pitch this September.

Commissioned Diocesan Evangelists

Likewise, we continue to recruit and train women and men for the work of Diocesan Evangelists. A new staff member, Kyle Harris, was commissioned recently for Moira Parish. Three were recruited at our last selection day. We now have in total 18 Diocesan Evangelists or evangelists in training. There is a distance to go. The Church of Ireland at its recent General Synod gave approval for a training process for Pioneer Ministers, most of whom will not be ordained but will do similar work to what our diocesan evangelists have been doing.

Youth and Children's Paid Staff Workers

Josh Thornbury has filled the role of Diocesan Youth Development Officer vacated by Tim Burns. Tim served us so well and Josh builds on his foundation, the challenge is great but the opportunities greater still.

Millie Bellew has been appointed as our Children's Development Officer after Julie Currie, who produced so many resources, moved out of that role to serve on the staff of Hillsborough Parish as Family Ministry Pastor.

Sunday School teachers and Youth Fellowship leaders

We aim to have an adequate number of Sunday School teachers to staff Sunday Schools in every church in our diocese. Likewise, we need youth fellowships in every group or union in our diocese. I'm on record as being opposed to church closures but churches will close themselves and will deserve to close if they don't pull out all the stops doing whatever it takes, whatever it costs to have a healthy, thriving Sunday School in every church and in addition youth and children's ministry in every union or group of parishes. Select Vestries have been asked to prioritise money for children's and for youth ministries.

The work of Select Vestries

We held five very worthwhile evenings for Select Vestries just over a month ago. I've asked Select Vestries to raise, by increasing the income of their parishes, the monies needed especially for youth and children's ministries. We cannot fail to pass on the faith to the next generation. We now employ 28 paid youth workers and children's workers. This is more youth and children's workers than this time last year.

Josh Thornbury has now scheduled the next batch of training for volunteer and youth leaders to take place on Saturday 24 September 2022. **Millie Bellew** has now scheduled the next batch of training for Sunday School teachers which will also take place on Saturday 24 September 2022.

Ministry Apprentices

Since our last Synod when this scheme was first mentioned we have secured from outside funding sources £106k towards the running costs over three years. We will be advertising for and recruiting the first tranche within the next few weeks.

Parish Visitors

We aim to have and raise up over the next ten years one volunteer parish visitor for every 50 homes on our parish records. Vestries and clergy have been informed of this very excellent accredited pastoral care course that we now have in place and that will be run at least once every year. Thirteen people have just completed this course bringing the total in our diocese to 81 in the past five years.

However, many parishes need to avail of the opportunity of releasing women and men into this important ministry which supports the essential pastoral work of clergy.

Outreach Workers

Plans are being developed now by the House of Bishops in conjunction with Church Army to train new pioneer leaders, outreach workers and others. Our target also over the next ten years is to also raise up, recruit and train an additional 50 family support workers or outreach workers or other lay workers for trained and voluntary lay ministry roles across the diocese. Presently in our diocese four are employed in such roles and some of those have taken up their role in the last year.

Parishes, I believe, are well resourced by our diocese.

Roy Lawther is available to deal with queries ranging from rectory provision to HR, Health and Safety and just about everything that relates to good and safe ministry provision.

Andrew Brannigan provides a myriad of training courses and helps in the recruitment of people for training. In addition, he is very involved in our Safeguarding provision.

Brian Lavery works hard to ensure our Diocese manages our finances well so that increasingly we are better able to resource ministry at parish level. Brian recently informed us that the move a few years ago from a joint administration - staff shared with Connor diocese - saves both dioceses £140k per annum.

Annette McGrath is available to help parishes with their online presence and is hard at work producing printed and video resources, e.g. the Lent Series and the upcoming Generosity Course. There are now over 300 videos on our YouTube channel. These have the potential to be used in ongoing ways.

Wellbeing Volunteers

Over the next ten years we plan to recruit and train Wellbeing Volunteers in every church in our Diocese to act as champions for people's wellbeing. We have made a beginning. Tim Burns will continue to provide us with advice on this area of ministry. Small grants are available to parishes through the Church of Ireland MindMatters project for seed funding. The closing date is 29 July 2022.

Currently, Keith Gardiner, our Fundraising Officer for Church Growth is available to lead a four-week course on generosity in our parishes. This course will be made available as an online video resource. A very important evening for rectors and for treasurers will take place at the Vic-Ryn Conference Centre on the evening of Thursday 29th September.

My PA, Tracey Taggart, is always ready to take your messages, point clergy and others in the right direction, knows the diocese so well, and above all provides me as bishop with the professional and effective support that the office demands. Thank you, Tracey, for your constant support and all that you do that is such a rich blessing to this diocese.

Apostleship

There are a variety of new ministry initiatives that our parishes and our diocese need to bring into being. I've already named that we need to aim at having a Sunday School connected to every church in our diocese and a Youth Fellowship connected to every parish group or union in our diocese. In addition, our parishes should all look at how we bring into existence at least one community project that engages with the needs of our wider parish communities. An evening or day on resources and ideas on how to commence a community project will be held at the Vic-Ryn Conference Centre in spring of 2023.

We now have nine church plants in the Diocese:

Braniel Community Church in Braniel Estate
Killicomaine Community Church
Moneyreagh Community Church
St Donard's, Dundrum, Community Church
The Gathering, Titanic Quarter that meets in what was St Martin's Church.
Glen Community Church in Newtownards
HOPE Church in Craigavon

and two newly established church plants since our last Diocesan Synod:

West Winds Community Church in Newtownards and
Tullycarnet Church

These new ministries are all impacting communities that we would not otherwise be reaching. Leadership is key. People are coming to faith, discipleship is at their centre, new leaders are being raised up and people and resources that would otherwise not be ours are ushering in God's kingdom. Parishes and individuals will want to support financially and prayerfully this work. A range of information materials are now available to parishes.

Church Rejuvenation

Another aspect of our work however is the rejuvenation of a few parishes who for a variety of reasons have encountered significant decline and are in danger of collapse. I am committed to us providing imaginative, practical and appropriate leadership to reenergise and rejuvenate these parishes. This will cost money and the diocese has set up a Rejuvenation Fund. Again, stronger

parishes and individuals who have money to give and a concern to see other weaker churches thrive again, have the opportunity to contribute to this work by choosing to partner in even some small way with another parish. Parishes are asked to consider holding a gift day towards this fund on Sunday 25th September. More details will soon be sent to parishes.

This is yet another of our ten-year goals, which is to have ten churches that would in a meaningful way partner with and resource other less resourced churches to grow and move towards their fuller potential. Currently Willowfield help St Clement's and the Braniel Community Church Plant. Drumbeg resource St Donard's Church Plant in Dundrum and Ballyeasboro Church. St Mark's Newtownards clergy and lay readers support Ardkeen Parish. Magheralin support St John's, Lurgan, and other partnerships will emerge as we informally and voluntarily link churches across our diocese in creative ways.

Keith Gardiner has produced a raft of very useful resources to enable parishes to financially and in other ways reap the benefits, the joys and the life-giving energy that comes from embracing a mentality of rising to apostolic opportunities.

Nothing stands still, and these apostolic opportunities will continue to emerge over the next 10 years in our broken world that needs faithful Gospel church led by faithful Gospel people empowered by God the Holy Spirit.

The invasion of Ukraine by Putin's Russian military followed close on the scenes of people fleeing Afghanistan has raised a challenge that churches cannot ignore. Currently 200-300 refugees are arriving into Northern Ireland every month and this figure is expected to rise exponentially over the next 5 years, with a lot of these people expected to arrive into our diocese as Belfast, Bangor and Castlereagh have been designated strategic reception areas. We have sought in many ways in our parishes to respond to the crisis in Ukraine. Some parishes are already attempting to welcome refugees despite our government's heavy bureaucracy that often seems lacking in care and in practical professionalism.

Our parishes have given generously to the crisis through the Bishop's Appeal Fund and other aid agencies and lorry loads of goods left our diocese to be sent to refugees in Poland and other eastern European countries.

As part of our Apostleship focus, in the future we as a diocese will plant at least one new diocesan outreach initiative to reach out to and care for refugees. Parishes will also need to put in place ministries that will lead to the percentage of the ethnic groups worshipping with us adequately reflecting the numbers of people from other ethnic backgrounds that live in our parishes. Our churches should mirror God's heart and his purposes and plans for the new order as John tells us in the book of Revelation it will be. Over the coming months if you would like to get involved with this new Diocesan Outreach to Refugees – either by praying, volunteering,

or supporting it financially – please contact either Andrew Brannigan or Keith Gardiner in the first instance.

With John’s vision of his church in glory we now move towards our Synod business for today:

Revelation 7: 9-12

A Great Multitude from Every Nation

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Rt Revd David McClay
Bishop of Down and Dromore