

Diocese of Down and Dromore
DIOCESAN SYNOD
20 June 2019

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The Rt Revd Harold Miller,
Bishop of Down and Dromore

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

It has been a privilege to serve as your bishop in the diocese of Down and Dromore for just over 22 years. This is my 23rd presidential address at a diocesan synod. The calling to be bishop of Down and Dromore was one which I didn't expect. The diocese was one which, at the time, I didn't really know, but which has now become my home; and those 22 years have provided me with both joy and pain, comfort and challenge, success and failure, as is true of any ministry in the history of the church. The things which have sustained me above all else are the ongoing assurance that this ministry is God's call, and the promise of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and sustain a mere sinful but redeemed human being. These things, along with the warmth, love and prayers I have received from you, have enabled me to exercise episcopal oversight for more than two decades, more than half of my entire ordained ministry of 43 years, the anniversary of which I celebrate in four days' time.

Now, the time has come to tell you that I notified the Archbishop of Armagh yesterday of my intention to retire on 30 September this year. The time comes for all of us to slow down, move to a new stage of life, and hand on the reins to someone fresh and new. Mind you, our calling to serve the Lord is for life, but it is time to do that in a different way and at a different pace! I don't think I ever imagined continuing in active ministry to the age of 69. On a few occasions I thought of retiring earlier, but the Lord seemed to close the door. I am grateful that he has given me the health, strength and refreshment of spirit to continue to now. I think it is true to say that I am the longest serving bishop of this diocese since Bishop Robert Knox, who retired after 37 years in 1886!

Retirement looming gives me a last, and focussed opportunity to reflect with you as a synod over the past 22 years. But, before I do so, I want to tell you a story of two young Muslim lads who were staying one summer at the Church of Ireland Centre in Queen's, when I was chaplain there. They had invited us in to sample their food on one or two occasions. Then, one Saturday morning, they arrived at the front door of our house, to say 'Goodbye'. They began: 'Please forgive us for anything we've done wrong while here'. Well, so far as I was concerned, they had been model guests, and hadn't done anything wrong. But they said that this was an important way of leaving for them, so that they could leave in peace.

I don't know if that is a Muslim tradition or habit, but I do know it would be a great Christian habit! So, I want to say to you, before my 'Farewells', Please forgive me for anything I have done to you, or any way in which I may have hurt any of you, over the past 22 years. I pray that grievances will be healed and any broken relationship mended. Bishops often find themselves in challenging, conflictual situations, as the last port of call to solve the impossible; or saying things they wish they could unsay. So, I simply ask for your blessing, and assure you that I am not carrying any unforgiveness with me. I wish nothing more than God's goodness to be with you all.

During my first year as bishop, on Good Friday 1998, the Belfast agreement was signed. It was, in my view, quite miraculous. What had seemed impossible for the preceding 30 years of pain and division, now became possible: that we, in this troubled province, might find ourselves at peace

with one another, and walking together into the future with hope, mutual respect and imagination. The fact that the agreement was ratified by 71% in Northern Ireland and 94% in the Republic of Ireland was truly amazing, and much of the quality of life and reduction in violence we have today is due to that basic starting-point.

Like you, I wish that we had progressed further by now, 21 years later. It saddens me that we are still unable to move forward confidently with our devolved government; it saddens me that our traditional tribal politics are so ingrained, and that sectarianism remains a reality; it saddens me that we are not able to deal effectively with key issues of health, education, infrastructure, business and social cohesion. Sadness can quickly become frustration and even anger, but, in all these feelings and longings, we do need to constantly recognise that we have come a very long distance indeed, and that hope is still a vital element

One of the other big events of 1998 for Liz and myself was the Lambeth Conference. We were proud to go, and thrilled to be part of the Anglican Communion worldwide. It was possibly the last Lambeth Conference with meaningful resolutions, and with the concept that this gathering of bishops from all over the world can give spiritual leadership with moral authority. As a young, and very green new bishop, Lambeth 1998 was indeed one of the highlights of my entire life. It was such a privilege to meet with godly bishops, passionate servant-hearted followers of Jesus Christ, from all over the world, many of whom were coming from parts of the world where Christians were suffering persecution.

One of the special blessings for Liz and myself was to meet with Bishop Dan Herzog, Bishop of Albany, and his wife Carol. This led to the link between Albany Diocese and the Diocese of Down and Dromore, which has continued under Bishop Bill Love, and has now been in existence for 20 years. Do pray for Bishop Bill as he seeks to lead the diocese through challenging times, in a way which is faithful to God's Word.

At the request of our Diocesan Council, that link, right from the beginning, also had a third strand; a link with our beloved diocese of Mardi, in South Sudan, which Liz and I had visited in 1999. I'm thrilled to say that Bishop Moses, Bishop of Maridi and Bishop Bill plan to be with us around the time of the Bible Week. What a joy it will be for the strands of the threefold cord to be together again! This will be the first time bishop Moses has visited Down and Dromore.

The tragedy, over the last two decades, of the divisions in Anglicanism, has been heart-rending. The communion which gave me a sense of pride, is now a source of sorrow and pain, and will probably never be the same again, no matter what your perspective. There is a sense of a 50:50 divide, even though that numerically is not the case. The vast majority of Anglicans are conservative and orthodox. But the wealth, the power and the communications are generally in the hands of the declining, numerically weak parts, which exercise much more control than their numbers would warrant.

So pray about all those things which for me were such encouraging starting-points. Pray for our province, for the Anglican Communion, and indeed those who govern more widely as they all face the question of how to live with, and remain faithful in, a world of polar, and at times bitter, opposites. How to live humbly, faithfully and peaceably in such a world is quite a challenge.

Most of the rest of this presidential address will be on the theme of 'Thanksgiving'. I think it was Mayor Giuliani of New York who said that one of the main tasks of a leader is to say, 'Thank you'. St Paul, in so many of his epistles says that he gives thanks for the believers. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:4, a verse from one of our readings this morning,

‘I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.,

So, as I look back over two decades, I truly give thanks for you, followers of Jesus Christ in the diocese of Down and Dromore, whom I have had the privilege of getting to know and serve alongside. We have loved one another as a family and it has been a joy to call this wonderful diocese my home. But lest I become cloyingly sentimental, I will add a little word of ‘challenge to continue’ at the end of each thanksgiving!

1. I give thanks that the Gospel is transforming lives.

It has been deeply moving for me to hear of hundreds, if not thousands, of people, who have come to a living faith in Christ through the churches of this diocese. That is perhaps more evident than ever in the less churchgoing, more secular society in which we now live. I reckon I have confirmed between five and six thousand people over these years. Every one has been a privilege. I sense a real engagement with faith in those whom I confirm. When ‘adults’ are confirmed, I often ask them ‘What has brought you to this point’. With some it is a way of showing commitment to the Church of Ireland, but with many, it is that they have come from a place of no faith, to a place of living faith in Christ, through the ministry of the local church. I want to tell you, we are good at evangelism, so good that we sometimes take it for granted.

The other thing I have recently become aware of, is that, in inner-city churches, and in churches on the larger estates around the city, there are now regularly more adult baptisms than infant baptisms. If we think back, even to 20 years ago, we rarely experienced an adult baptism, let alone a baptism by submersion done by or in a Church of Ireland Church. Now, it is part of our normality, and praise God for it. But I also appeal to believers to have their children baptised, and brought to the Lord in their infant days.

Challenge:

Now, here’s my challenge: remember that Jesus, in the great commission, calls us, not just to make converts, but to *make disciples*. That is a longer, harder, more challenging process but without it, we will fail our new believers, and leave them as immature infants, rather than mature followers.

2. I give thanks that we have experienced some recent growth.

According to the statistical analysis submitted to the General Synod Office comparing the Church of Ireland national censuses of 2013 and 2016, the number of worshippers in this diocese grew by just over 4%. Now, one swallow doesn’t make a summer, and, like other churches, we are not as large as we used to be. According to those statistics, we account for around a quarter of the total number of worshippers in our entire denomination. And the truth is, that our growth is uneven. We have as many declining as growing churches. The truth is also that we would not have grown had it not been for our church plants - praise God for them! The expectation of numerical growth, as well as spiritual growth, needs to be part of our DNA, as it was in the Acts of the Apostles, when the Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved.

Challenge:

And the challenge is this: threefold-

-Can we help believers to see the value of regular weekly worship as part of their rule of life? If all those who were regular weekly worshippers became regular fortnightly worshippers, our worshipping numbers would halve. But worse, we would find it harder and harder to build meaningful Christian community and commitment.

-Keep planting!

-Let's work together to help declining churches which are really serious about change, to be able to learn the skills they need to bring it about.

3. I give thanks for the number of people who have been ordained and commissioned.

As an average, I have had the privilege of ordaining four people each year as deacons and four as priests or presbyters. Over 23 ordination seasons, that makes almost a hundred in each order. What a privilege and joy that has been. But recently, we have been commissioning church planters, evangelists, and a particularly large number of diocesan readers - 18 last year, another 11 next week in Down Cathedral and 12 in training - men and women who have the glorious task of proclaiming and teaching the Word of God.

At a recent confirmation service, two young lads in their later teens, came up to me and said: 'Bishop, that was a brilliant sermon. Thank you.' That doesn't usually happen with later teens! I found myself responding by saying to them: 'There is no greater privilege this side of heaven than preaching the Word of God. Maybe you will be called to share in that privilege, too.'

Challenge:

The challenge is this:

That there are many of those younger Christians, as many as 30 in this diocese, who have already gained theological qualifications, but who don't necessarily want to be ordained. Andrew Brannigan has done a chart of the age profile of clergy in the Church of Ireland, and it is frightening. I ask myself why so many younger people, passionate for Christ, are not seeking ordination and I come up with worrying thoughts: Do they see clergy wading through the 'treacle' of institutional paralysis, or disagreements in congregations, or of the modern-day inability to allow leaders to lead? Do they see the 'institution' as on the way out, or institutional training as unlikely to develop their skills to reach their own generation? Whatever thought needs to be given or we will lose the imaginative gifts of a new generation.

In September, before I leave, I will (DV) ordain some of the first Ordained Local Ministers in the Church of Ireland. I decided (my successor may decide differently) that, at this stage, I would reserve OLM for people engaging in new, fresh, on-the-edge ministries. I want to assure young leaders that there will be an honoured place for them in the ministry of the Church of Ireland. We desperately need them for the future, not least in ministering to their peers.

4. I give thanks for the Lord's generous provision.

It is remarkable how the Lord always provides for the work and ministry of his church. I am humbled by the way in which churches in this diocese rise to the challenge of providing for mission, ministry, buildings and programmes in each of your contexts. Sometimes it can be difficult, but we have a sustained policy in this diocese of enabling each church to become self-sustaining. That is healthy, and I know of many other dioceses which envy our model. Even in the contexts of Fresh Expressions, and church plants, we always move from the beginning, by the grace and provision of God, towards a place of sustainability. The new proposal for assessments which will be presented at this synod keeps that principle at the very centre. Thank the Lord, too, that our Church Planting Fund has enabled us, along with grants from other bodies, not least the Church of Ireland Priorities Fund, to plant healthy new congregations in various places. We need to continue the work of that fund, which I always said would be my last financial appeal to the diocese. It was birthed through the Bible Week, so I will be asking that our giving this year will be to the Church Planting Fund.

Even through the most difficult of financial times, our income has held up, and we find ourselves as a diocese, at this point, in a very healthy financial position. Of course, the diocese is utterly dependent on healthy local churches. We are not an 'endowed diocese' and that is a good place to be. It encourages growth, sacrificial giving and dependency on God.

Challenge:

So what is the challenge in this area? Well, I observe from the list in the diocesan synod report, that our giving to those outside of ourselves is not increasing as much as it might: giving to mission, to developing world needs, to local charities seems to have plateaued. I would encourage every church in the diocese not just to promote tithing among its members, but to seek to give a tithe of its own income away.

5. I give thanks for our engagement with the needs around us.

The years of the troubles made churches more obsessed with themselves and their own preservation than they ought to have been. The church was, in some cases, the only place of stability, the 'safe space', the part of the world which hadn't changed. That was, in my view, exacerbated in the Church of Ireland which, though disestablished for more than a century at the time (now 150 years) still retained something of an 'establishment mindset'. We were generally pietistic, traditional in our ways, often inward-looking and perhaps appeared comfortable.

One of the things which has blessed me greatly over the last two decades, is to see churches engage more with their community, with servant hearts towards the needs of others. This of course, is what we were always intended to be. 'Parish churches' are churches which exist in a geographical context, and which are there for the blessing of those who live in their area. I see this engagement more than ever now: homework clubs, schools programmes, toddlers' groups, foodbanks, job clubs, debt counselling, mental health issues, addictions, loneliness...and the list goes on. Thank God for this. It not only blesses communities, it energises the people of God to do acts of love and mercy, and it makes us more like Jesus!

Challenge:

My only challenge is this: 'More, Lord!'. Let's take all the centripetal energy which focusses on churchy things like pews and fine liturgical detail (the latter of which I can do with great gusto myself!), and invite the Lord to redirect that energy and make us centrifugal - driven out into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform people and society, like the church after Pentecost. The other things will take care of themselves. Can you imagine if all 80 of our units in this diocese were like that?

6. I give thanks for our worldwide interest and involvement.

I dare to think that some of that goes back to our DNA in St Patrick and the Bangor saints. It greatly heartens me that we have so many missional links, which are also personal relationships. What a blessing it is to have Bishop Samy from the diocese of Egypt with us, and we are hoping to touch base with your diocesan bishop, Bishop Mouneer, later this summer. That one link takes us to the number of people who have worked through CMSI in the School for the Deaf in Cairo over the years. It also reminds us of our very powerful presentation from Open Doors on St Patrick's Day in Down Cathedral. And then we have Raj and Premilla who, at one point were ministering in Port Said.

Or, we have our representatives from the Keralan congregation who meet in Drumbeg Parish, worshipping in their own language, and using the Church of South India liturgy. I had the privilege

of being with them last month and of meeting again with Jacob Thomas, who used to teach at Belfast Bible College, and had permission to officiate in this diocese.

I could go on and on. It is such a blessing that we belong to the worldwide church. A group from Moira will be in Kenya later this month, the Dean of Dromore has just cycled around Northern Ireland for South Sudan, Bishop Moses and Bishop Bill will be with us during the Bible Week, We have the SAMS base in the diocese, and Gerardo from Chile in Shankill, Lurgan; links with Rwanda through Mary and Jerome Munyangaju, indeed our own June Butler was representing the Mothers Union in Rwanda this month, and Bishop Darren McCartney is coming back from the Arctic to be instituted to Rostrevor and Warrenpoint next week. I know I have left lots of others out - there is simply so much.

If I were to choose one event from my episcopate which left me stunned by God's presence and power, it would be the *Spirit of Patrick* event in Down Cathedral when we honoured four missional people: Sheilagh Jebb, Helen Rosevere (both in glory now), Cyril McElhinney and Cecil and Myrtle Kerr. The wonder of what God can do with a consecrated life was palpable that evening, and the honour of knowing such people is a great privilege.

Challenge:

The challenge is never to lose that missional instinct. It is a special gift particularly seen in Ireland, and our missionary societies need to engage a new generation of believers as we give and receive from the Church worldwide.

7. I give thanks for faithfulness to the scriptures.

I do not think the importance of this can be exaggerated in a postmodern, subjectivistic world, where everyone does what is right in their own eyes, and where personal experience becomes the arbiter of what is true. The essential task of a bishop in the historic succession is to pass on the faith once delivered to the saints, unsullied, to future generations. The teaching role and teaching seat or 'cathedra' of the bishop are testimony to this. We believe that God's Word contains all things necessary to salvation, that the historic creeds are true to that Word, and that the Church of God is to be called and governed by that Word in every generation.

If I were to tell you the craziness of some of the things which are happening in once-faithful churches, you simply would not believe me. They are public. There are churches which allow people who are self-acclaimed atheists to continue as ministers, under the banner of 'inclusivity'; churches which celebrate 'springtime' instead of Easter; churches where clergy want to change the language of 'Trinity' to the language of 'mystery' because they no longer believe the doctrine of the Trinity.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, remaining faithful to the doctrine and teaching of the apostles is always critical, in every era, and more than ever in ours. We in the Church of Ireland have inherited that doctrine in the Creeds, the Articles and the Book of Common Prayer. We lose it at our peril. If we lose it we will have no power in our proclamation, and no hope for our future.

Challenge:

And that is my last challenge. A challenge I have been supremely aware of as I stand in Saul Church each St Patrick's Day, in the words of the Breastplate : 'I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity...', with the declaration as its highlight 'Salvation is of Christ the Lord!'

and lastly,

8. I give thanks for the team of people with whom I have been privileged to serve.

No ministry can be effective on its own, and especially episcopal ministry. It is only as good as the team around it. I have been deeply aware of that over the last 22 years. The team of clergy in the diocese, those who have served on synods, diocesan councils and committees, on Select Vestries in the parishes; those who have given of themselves in teaching and discipling children and young people, in ministries of music and creativity, in work with women, men, families, older people etc etc.

I thank also those who have been around me over the years as archdeacons, deans and area deans, and those who have done the work of administration and ministry in and through the diocesan office. It is invidious to single out particular names, but I really must mention some.

- I thank Bishop Ken Clarke who, while he was not yet retired, acted as my 'assistant bishop'. He was always there when I needed episcopal advice and support, and I am very grateful. Now, Bishop Ken joins a very long list of retired bishops living in the diocese, which I will also soon add my name to!
- I thank my archdeacons, David McClay and Roderic West. I could not have better archdeacons. The mountain of work they get through is enormous, they both affirm and challenge me in equal measure, and their friendship and loyalty is greatly valued.
- I thank the deans of our two Cathedrals, and also the Dean of St Anne's, who has to manage two bishops. The work of a dean isn't always easy, and I greatly appreciate all three, Henry Hull, Geoff Wilson and Stephen Forde.
- I thank our honorary secretaries in the diocese, Ken Higgins, Geoff Wilson, Elizabeth Leonard and Basil O'Malley, who give unstintingly of their time and gifting for the work of the diocese. No one will ever know the amount they do in the background, not least for the work of this Synod and its council.
- I thank the team at the diocesan office. I have to say that it is a very happy place to work, led by Roy Lawther, who always exudes a mood of calm and quiet efficiency, with Brian Lavery, who has very quickly and efficiently got a handle on our accounts, with the inimitable Tracey Taggart, who probably knows more about the Constitution than anyone else in the Church of Ireland, and rescues me from many potential hazards. This administrative 'trinity' is phenomenal.
- I thank our DCO, Annette McGrath, for her persistently good work. She has just been revamping our website, and is always there in times of crisis. She is excellent at handling the media and presenting the face of the diocese, and her photos are superb.
- I thank the 'Ministry Development Team', under the inimitable Andrew Brannigan, who will have been with us 20 years this year. We will be celebrating the work of that department, so superbly carried out by Brandy, Julie Currie and Tim Burns, at this year's Bible Week. We simply could not have a better Children's Development Officer than Julie or Youth Development Officer than Tim.
- And I thank my PA, the one and only Mary Coles, who will also be celebrating 20 years working for the diocese later this year. I know that Mary prefers to be in the background, but her very voice on the phone is soothing and welcoming, and she has been a great blessing to me.

Finally, you will receive today the information, which had to be kept under wraps till now, about this year's Bible Week at the end of August, when I will be speaking about four key 'Farewell' passages in the Bible. It will be a very emotional week for me. You are my family, this is my home now, but I must lay down the crozier, move on to the next stage, and entrust all of you to the grace of the Lord, who will sustain and lead you in the years to come.