Celebrate the distinctiveness of our schools, says Bishop of Clogher in Synod address

The Bishop of Clogher, the Right Revd Dr. Ian Ellis, presenting his presidential address at the Clogher Diocesan Synod on Thursday evening, 26 September, reviewed the changes in clerical personnel during the past year, highlighted the impact of global conflicts on communities, spoke of the need for positivity in church work, highlighted the importance of denominational education in our schools, reported on the Diocesan Review of parishes structures and he announced a new initiative to plan an active promotion of vocation.

The text of Bishop Ellis’s address;

**Global conflicts**

As we look out across the world there are ongoing conflicts in many countries – some are well reported such as Ukraine, and Gaza and others not so well covered by the media but equally dangerous for example Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In recent days the UK Prime minister has warned that the Middle East is on the brink of war following the escalating conflict between Israel and Lebanon. These serious threats to world stability are concerning and can make us feel powerless. As Christian people we can only pray that God might make wars to cease and for peaceful solutions be found to conflict. We continue to pray too for all who suffer because of war – the bereaved, injured and displaced and pray for all aid and peacekeeping agencies.

**Recent Pastoral letter**

On Sunday past I asked clergy and Readers to read out in our churches a letter signed by all the bishops serving in Northern Ireland. It refers to recent street protests, rise of hate crime and intimidation, and deliberate spreading of fear around topics of racial diversity and immigration. I hope you found the letter positive and helpful as it shares our Christian outlook on being good citizens. For the follower of Christ, the needs of others are to be prioritised over our own needs.

The letter reminds us that the Church was to be a place where each person was treasured, where people would share with others the unconditional love and acceptance that they had known through Christ. It is in that spirit that we wish to reassure people from other cultures or countries or simply people of colour that we appreciate your presence and the grace which you bring to us.

The letter also offers thanks to all clergy and parishioners who have been working very hard on the ground, and often in challenging circumstances or even in a hostile environment, to care for all their neighbours. It concludes by encouraging us all to consider practical ways that we can in our everyday lives put into practice the teaching of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and to stand with those in need.

In our everyday lives we are acutely aware of the contribution of those who have come to live among us from other nations. Many serve in the medical, nursing and care sectors and we are hugely dependent on their expertise and service. They deserve our utmost respect and support – as the letter says we should learn to ‘think local’ and be aware of people’s heightened concerns at this time and offer support and friendship.

I know that most of the unrest has been in our larger towns and cities in the east, however we all do well to be reminded to model the attitudes of our Lord in our engagement with those we meet who have come to live and work in our community, and who provide such a valuable service to the common good of all.

Education

I’d like to say a few words now about our church’s involvement in Education.

I am constantly amazed how God uses our experiences and background for his purposes in our ministry. I began my working career as a teacher before feeling the call of God to ordained ministry. And all through my ministry that educational background has been helpful in the schools I have been privileged to be associated with. Interestingly as bishop I now am a patron to four national schools in Co Monaghan and I really enjoy when I can to visit the schools and encouraging their work.

In addition, I am joint patron of Monaghan Collegiate and enjoy chairing its Board of Governors and have also recently been elected chair of the Board of Governors of Enniskillen Royal Grammar School. Like many clergy in these educational roles, they demand quite a bit of our time, but they are vital links to the wider community and express not just our historic role in education but also the outreach and influence of the church in the public square.

I commend to you the work of the staff and members of boards of management and boards of governors in these schools. In the last year we have appointed two new principals – Mrs Laura McAree has been appointed principal of The Billis NS near Glasslough, and Mrs Tara Cowan principal of Monaghan Collegiate. Laura succeeds Ruth Williamson who retired and was an excellent principal for over 20 years and Tara succeeded Johnston Reid who has also retired and who provided excellent leadership of the Collegiate for 14 years. We wish both principals every blessing in the new roles they have undertaken in our schools.

There are some in wider society who are critical of denominational education particularly in the Republic of Ireland. We should not take our position for granted but be prepared to celebrate the distinctiveness of our schools and actively promote them for the value they bring to the education of children and their contribution to diversity in wider society. We must cherish this gift we have to offer to parents and children of education in schools under Church of Ireland patronage and ensure that they continue to flourish.

Diocesan Review

Speaking of change brings me to our most important diocesan change process – the Diocesan Review.

*‘For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven’* Ecclesiastes 3:1

Every organisation if it is to remain healthy and flourish, must from time-to-time review how it is doing. It is important to agree on what is being done well and enhance it or discover what is not doing as well and transform it. Churches and dioceses are no different in that sense to schools or government departments – all need to periodically review the effectiveness of their core activities.

Clogher Diocese last conducted a review in the early 2000s during the episcopacy of Bishop Michael Jackson. The Diocesan Council has decided that 2024 is an opportune time for a comprehensive review of the structure of parish organisation across the diocese. This is particularly relevant following the Covid pandemic and the changing demographic and economic circumstances that have arisen. A Review Team has been established and has been working in the background preparing the way forward to conduct the review.

The Council delegated me to nominate the members of the Review team who have been drawn from every Rural Deanery in the diocese: Revd Canon Alan Irwin, Archdeacon Paul Thompson, Revd Ian Cruikshank, Revd Lorraine Capper, Mrs Ethne McCord, Miss Joyce Clingan, Mrs Florence Brunt and Mr Michael Skuce. We are so grateful to the team who will exceptionally busy for the next few months as they conduct consultations in the parishes. I personally thank them for their commitment and enthusiasm.

The first stage of the Review will be to conduct a consultation with parishioners of every parish in the diocese. This has already begun in parishes and will continue through the Autumn period. In addition to this there is an online survey which has already opened and will enable any Church of Ireland member of the diocese who wishes to respond to submit their views – details are available in the diocesan magazine.

A member of the Review Team will by now have contacted the Honorary Secretaries of each parish to arrange a consultation meeting to take place in the parish hall or church building. It will be important for as many parishioners as possible to be informed about the meetings and encouraged to come along and contribute.

Meetings are be structured and led in such a way as to make it easy for participation and allow respectful discussion. Parishioners are warmly invited to come along and share their views or to listen to the views of others. It is not just for Select Vestry members – please spread the net widely!

There is no predicted outcome, no hidden agenda at play. We want parishioners to discuss and share their views on four key themes relevant to their parish: The present, the future, Christian outreach, and administration / support. We need your insights into these foundational themes to help us look inwards, outwards and across the diocese and thus scope out the future.

The Review Team will over the months following analyse the responses from the various consultations and begin to find common threads. They have been asked to make a report to the Diocesan Synod in 2025.

It is important to stress this is not the Diocesan Council bringing proposals to you, rather it is an opportunity for parishioners to reflect on the health of the parish and to tell us how you think your parish and the diocese might be in ten years’ time. We hope that thoughts and ideas will emerge from honest discussion which will help us to shape priorities and let’s pray that God might lead us forward into his future for our parishes here in Clogher.

**The challenges of change**

Change is challenging but we must however approach the future in a positive way – it is so easy to become negative and think all is doom and gloom. Our hope and the experience of the discussions already is that parishes find that they have strengths as well as challenges, they can discover that they have resources, initiative and resilience that will sustain them into the future. It is also a time when we look outwards and think of ways of reaching out to our community and find ways of growing our parishes, extending our mission and drawing new members and lapsed members back to church. We therefore pray and work for growth as we seek the will of God.

Please may I ask that we use this season to examine ourselves honestly and vow to banish negativity, it is one of the most destructive forces in communities. Let’s refuse to listen to it and decline to give it any encouragement. This diocese and parishes will flourish when clergy and laity work together constructively with the diocesan staff and the leadership I as your bishop can offer with God’s help.

It is so important for the family of God to remain unified and to positively contribute to the common good – a critical spirit, blaming others, and a general negative attitude will get us nowhere. They are not Christian values; they are not the way of Jesus Christ. Let’s banish negativity!

Speaking of the positive reminds me that we give thanks to God for the work of his Holy Spirit among us in calling Peter Booth from Ardess parish to the ordained ministry. I had the great privilege of ordaining Peter in St Macartin’s Cathedral, Enniskillen, on 8th September. He will serve a year as a deacon intern in Derryvullen North and Castle Archdale parishes.

Clogher diocese has two students training at the Church of Ireland Theological Institute at present, Peter Booth and Scott Elliott. This September, Scott began his intern year as a Reader in the parish of Rossorry and DV, will be ordained next year. It is wonderful to see to members of the diocese following their sense of vocation to ordained ministry, fulfilling the requirement of their training and reaching this point in their journey of ministry in the church.

We pray for both Peter and Scott as they enter this next phase of their training and move forward in faith. Pray too for the parishes in which they will serve and the rectors whom they will work alongside, namely Archdeacon Paul Thompson and Rev Stephen McWhirter.

On another positive note, it is so encouraging to know that another two members of our diocese will be commissioned for the work of a Diocesan Reader. It is so pleasing that Sarah Maguire from Rossorry Parish and William Graham from Castleblaney parish have responded to the call of God on their lives to the office of Reader. Readers make such an important contribution to the Sunday worship in parishes particularly during vacancies, times of clergy illness and to allow clergy a summer holiday.

I am equally aware of several vacant parishes in the diocese - we are no different from every other diocese in the Church of Ireland and we know of similar issues in other denominations. We are working towards filling these however the reality is that there has in recent years been a decrease in the number of potential ordinands coming forward. However, OLM and other ministries such as parish and diocesan readers, DPAs and Pioneer ministry opportunities open up a range of possibilities. As a diocese I feel we must actively promote the concept of vocation among our people.

Vocations Conference

In the New Year I will be working with Archdeacon Thompson, the Director of Ordinands and Rev Lorraine Capper, the Warden of Readers and lay ministry, to plan an active promotion of vocation. We are thinking of a vocation conference to present the full range of responses to the call of God on the life of every baptised member. We will be in touch with clergy to encourage this among the parishes early next year. I believe that if we reach out in faith with minds open to the call of God, his Spirit will ignite sparks of inward prompting and vocations will increase once more.

I have mentioned Archdeacon Thompson a couple of times already today - at last year’s synod I introduced him as the new Archdeacon and I am so thankful for everything he has done in support of me as bishop. I know many of you too have experienced his personal approach and many skills as he has dealt with matters that have arisen in parish and diocesan life. Thank you, Archdeacon Paul for your insight, sensitivity and practical approach to the challenges we have met. I am most grateful.

I am also ever thankful for the dedication and expertise of the Diocesan Staff. The Diocesan Office is small in scale but very effective. There are currently three part-time staff and four others providing a service to us on a sessional basis. This diocese is blessed with exceptional diocesan staff and a group of volunteers who support our work. As I look across the Church of Ireland dioceses, our administrative structure is one of the most professional and yet it is one of the leanest personnel structures and one of the most economical support services of all the dioceses. Our staff are mostly part-time or providing a service on a time limited basis.

As bishop I have come to realise just how important their work is and totally value the contribution they make. I know too that many clergy and laity have expressed to me their gratitude to the professional work they do on our behalf.

Lastly but very importantly, I should like to thank Lord Ben Stephens for his willingness to undertake the role of Diocesan Chancellor. It is most assuring to have his presence today as Assessor to the Diocesan Synod but also access to his expertise amid a most busy working life to help address legal queries which arise from time to time.

And so, with those words of thanks I conclude my address, and we turn now to the business of our Synod to matters of the diocese on our agenda. Thank you for your continued support and prayers for me as I by the help and power of Almighty God offer my ministry among you. I thank Heather for her support to me and for her work as Diocesan President of Mothers Union. On Sundays we can often be together in the parishes but often she is going to one church for a MU event and I to another. Recently I had the unusual experience of leading the service for a branch Mother’s Union and welcoming Heather as the preacher! Thank you, Heather, for your steadfast help in my ministry.