

Breaking Through the Stained Glass Ceiling
DCU Mary McAleese Women in Leadership Lecture
Delivered by the Bishop of Meath and Kildare, the Most Revd Pat Storey
DCU All Hallows Campus
7 September 2017

I want to sincerely thank you for the opportunity and the privilege to speak to you, and with you, this morning about my own experiences of leadership and perhaps more particularly, being a woman in leadership. And as if that wasn't enough, even more particularly, being a woman in church leadership which as you might imagine, can be quite a different ballgame! Just to fill you in a little on my background, as there is an assumption when you wear a clerical collar that you grew up destined to be in the church – I have a completely secular background. I grew up in a family that hadn't been to church in generations, and we valiantly carried on that tradition. . In the city centre in Belfast through the troubles, we actually lived next door to two different ministers – an Apostolic pastor on our left, and a Presbyterian minister on our right. We were nominal members of the Presbyterian church, and the only thing I really recall from childhood visits from the local minister was my Father trying to ply him with drink! I found Religious Education classes in school uninspiring and unattractive. The first thing that ever made me think about God was, believe it or not, the release of the film 'Jesus Christ Superstar.' While churches in 1975 across the land were condemning the film, I actually found it spiritually moving. It was the first time I ever thought about the person of Jesus Christ.

It was actually here in Dublin in Trinity (sorry, DCU!) in my first year at College, that I made friends who were very serious about their Christian faith, and who began to influence me. I did something I had never ever done – I began to read the Bible, and it was in the reading of the Gospels that I came across, in a living way, the personality of Jesus. You could say that he leapt out of the pages at me. I was hooked. That was how it all began.

Through the following years I shed the longheld desire of my earlier school years, which was to become an air hostess – that was why I studied languages both at school and then at Trinity, and I had a very glamorous Aunt who had worked for British Airways and I really just wanted to be her! But, against the odds, I started to think about doing some kind of church leadership. Of course the Church wasn't ordaining women then so that thought didn't occur to me. Immediately after Trinity I went to work in a church in South Dublin as a youth worker, and after many years doing several part time jobs, getting married and bringing up children, the call to ordained ministry came. Whilst I had got married and had children, all along the call to something else niggled at me. I was at home with the children for seven years, and I would still say that being at home full time with small children was the hardest job I ever did, and I include this one! Indeed, I have just looked after my 9 month old grandson for a weekend, and I have never been so tired in my entire life. I do not know how my daughter does it, or how I ever did it! I know now why you have children when you are young! But I knew back then that God was calling me to some form of

Christian leadership. When the children were 7 and 3, I went back to College to train for the ministry. My husband, Earl, who had been ordained since 1982, was a Rector in Bray at the time, and he was not, to say the least, over enamoured with this idea. He wanted me to do anything but this. I think he felt that two ministers in the family would be a horrendous lifestyle – both working nights and weekends and our children were still young. We actually had a lot to work through as a couple in the ensuing years and our path has not been easy. Thankfully he is 100% on board now, and indeed he would say that I enjoy the job a lot more than he ever did (he runs his own business now), and we have worked through years of uncertainty. We are very fortunate in our fifties to be as happy together as we have ever been. The actor James Garner once said ‘marriage is a lot like the army; everyone complains but you’d be surprised at the large number that re-enlist’. That, I think, could also be remarkably said of the church!

I did a curacy in Ballymena, shared ministry with Earl in Glenavy, Co Antrim for a few years, but we stopped working together when we decided we would rather stay married! Then I went to be Rector of St. Augustine’s in Derry where I was extremely happy and led a wonderful group of people.

I was finishing my 10th year in Derry, driving merrily home from my best friend’s wedding, not thinking about church matters at all, when the phone call came to tell me that I had ‘been elected’ Bishop of Meath and Kildare. No-one could have prepared me for that moment and for the hours to follow. I hadn’t even been aware that there was an election for a Bishop that day, and I certainly had never seen myself in the frame. Apparently I am the only Bishop to have asked for time and they gave me 24 hours! Interestingly, that was how some people knew it must be a woman! No man had ever asked for 24 hours to consult with family – I am assuming that wives were pretty much just informed that life was changing, whereas I felt that I couldn’t possibly make such a huge decision without at least asking my immediate family if they would be willing for their lives to change too!

That being said, I was in utter shock! It was not something I ever envisaged. Earl was in fact fantastic – from being dubious about my call to ordination because of the lifestyle implications, he immediately that day set aside his own career and life prospects, and encouraged me from the first moment to take the job. I took more convincing! At midnight on the night I was invited to become Bishop, my husband Earl and I walked our very large golden retriever over and back the Foyle Bridge in Derry as I struggled with what it would mean for us. We would have to leave our children behind. We would have to leave Derry which we loved immensely. And I had no idea what a Bishop did. The fact of being the first female Bishop in UK and Ireland and being a history maker was simply another level of terror. But as you can see – here I am! I took the job, survived the media onslaught (and that was very stressful for a few days), and I know a tiny bit more about what a Bishop does!

I do have to say that for me, at the time and in the ensuing months, the gender issue was a much lesser one than the reality of becoming a Bishop. Whilst

I totally appreciated the struggle that had gone before me in the church in order for me to even be eligible for ordination, I was much more conscious of the challenge of the top level of church leadership than of the whole 'first woman' thing. Perhaps that was just as well! When people ask me if I have come across obstacles as a woman in ministry, I realize that I am someone who doesn't look for offence. I am sure it is often intended, but some of it goes over my head. And when I come across assumptions, (and often that is what it is rather than outright misogyny) most of the time I just find them funny. Let me give you a few examples:

Recently I went to the bank to lodge a cheque. I handed it over to the cashier who took one look at it, passed it back over the desk to me and said 'The Bishop will have to sign that himself'. I smiled at her, passed it back over the desk, and said 'I am he'. She was, of course, mortified. People always are! I went to renew my driver's licence last week, and the young guy on the desk looked at my address and said, 'The Bishop's House? Wow! You're married to a Bishop?' Again, I chuckled and said, 'em no.....I am the Bishop', and again, he was extremely apologetic. People don't mean to be misogynistic by these incidents, and there have been quite a few – they are simply making assumptions, and in my case, 99% of the time they would be right in assuming the Bishop is a man! I have done it too – assuming a consultant or an engineer is male, assuming a nurse or a midwife is female. We all do it. We need to watch it – but we don't intend offence.

But this is my favourite one:

A few months after being consecrated as Bishop, the House of Bishops here in Ireland meet annually with the Bishops in Scotland and Wales – it's called the Celtic Bishops Conference. The Irish Bishops were early and having a meal together the night before. One of the other Bishops from UK arrived and came bustling over to us (12 of us sitting having dinner). He immediately came over to me and said 'Sorry to disturb you all, but (looking at me), my room doesn't seem to have been booked.'

The Irish Bishop beside me immediately caught on to what was going on and said hastily, 'no, no, this isn't our secretary'. The UK Bishop immediately stretched out his hand to shake mine and said 'oh I am so sorry – you must be one of the wives?'

At this point the Irish Bishop beside me nearly had apoplexy. Again, the bishop concerned was utterly mortified. Of course he was. We all would be. Isn't it interesting that in this day and age a woman at the senior level table is either bound to be the secretary, or the wife. And because I know that I make assumptions too, and I shouldn't, I find it more effective to treat it with humour than to take offence and make the other person feel worse. You still challenge the assumptions by being who you are, but you don't need to be brutal to other people in the midst of it. So I try not to take myself too seriously.

People often ask how the other 11 bishops have responded to having a woman around the table for the first time, and I have to say every single one of them have been fantastic. I have never had a sense of being inferior, or not being taken seriously, and probably the thing I have had to struggle with most is my own sense of self-esteem in the middle of it. They are eleven very clever men,

and at the beginning, it could be intimidating. However, The Archbishop of Armagh feels I am perfectly capable of holding my own, and he loves to say that 'the House of Bishops has twelve Alpha males, and I count the Bishop of Meath and Kildare in that'. Isn't it interesting, incidentally, that these assertive qualities are still seen as male? I have only ever had to raise the use of sexist language once in three years, and they have taken it on the chin when I have. It must be a new experience and an adjustment for them to have a female around the table. Sometimes when we dine together I just long for another woman to talk about shopping rather than sport – and I know that this in itself is full of assumptions, but personally, I like shopping better than sport. So my experience of being in the senior leadership team has been overwhelmingly positive. They are good men, and they have good hearts. They just need to talk about football less.

So setting the gender issue aside for the moment, what is it like to be a leader in the church? What are the challenges and the opportunities? How have recent changes in society and culture affected how we do leadership in the Church of Ireland? I have a few thoughts - firstly, numbers attending churches of all denominations have been gradually falling for at least a decade. There are a few exceptions, but that is a general truth. Secondly, the church has lost the control and influence it used to have on society, and that too is indisputable. Thirdly, various scandals have utterly eroded people's trust in the church, the hierarchy, and the moral fibre of those who wear clerical collars. Many of my male colleagues are afraid to wear a clerical collar in the street as they are often the victim of insults and hostility. Fourthly, there is far more competition for people's attention now, where in the past the church was the hub of the social life of the area. Everything used to happen in churches and church halls, and that is certainly no longer true. Fifthly, many many many people have lost faith in the established church and have ceased to be a part of it even though they might well consider themselves to be deeply spiritual. But faith and church are no longer synonymous.

There are probably a hundred other reasons, but these are the most blatantly obvious. As a result of all that, the church has been declining for some time in both numbers and in influence. What a challenge that presents! Perhaps one of the ways forward, and I would say this, is the full inclusion of women in church life which has now happened in my own denomination, and I do think it is crucial that 50% of the population is represented at the top level of leadership in all of society. When people ask me, and they always do (especially the media), what difference a woman brings to leadership – my answer is that I don't really know except that I bring being a woman. And that is enough! Where I work, women are now, albeit in single figures, represented at the highest level of church life and leadership.

It is probably fair to say that, in general, women are more collegial and think more about the effect their decisions will have on people emotionally, but there are many men who think that way and many women who don't! It is very difficult and unfair to generalize. However, in general, I do think that women bring more emotional intelligence to the role than, in general, most men do. I think it is part of 'the feminine' to be collaborative and to prefer decisions to be

reached together, bringing people along with you, than the traditional hierarchical and authoritarian approach that our churches have nurtured for so many years. Even though we have started small, it is nevertheless a very healthy and positive sign that women have broken the 'stained glass ceiling'. I do believe that this will change the nature of church leadership in Ireland.

We need more in our leaders than just being able to gather a following. We need to be equipped to face tough realities. Ronald Heifetz in his 'Leadership without easy answers' treatise says this: 'in a crisis we tend to look for the wrong kind of leadership. We call for someone with answers, decisions, strength and a map of the future, someone who knows where we ought to be going. In short, someone who can make hard problems simple. We should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions – problems that require us to learn new ways. Making progress on these problems requires not just someone who provides answers from on high, but someone who invites changes in our attitudes, behaviour and values. To meet challenges such as these, we need a different idea of leadership.'

I also believe that personal faith and particularly, spiritual joy is infectious and there is still an attractiveness around someone who has a vibrant faith and sees a way forward for the church through passing that faith on to others, especially the younger generation. Of course, there is no doubt that this is a challenge but as I travel around the Dioceses, doing Confirmations, I am encouraged most of the time by the quality of young people who are still interested in church life and in the faith of their parents and grandparents. It is my challenge to see them make it their own.

And of course the establishment needs to change. We need to look at all aspects of church life in a fresh way and be prepared for the change that is needed, but that is probably a more internal conversation. I cannot and don't assume that everyone here has any form of Christian, or any other, faith.

But I am a purveyor of hope. I do believe in the future of the church. I am not here to manage decline, or even just to run an organization, as that would put me over the edge. I feel confident of the future of the Church of Ireland in God's hands, if we are willing to work with that God.

People need their spiritual needs met, and we have to think about that much more creatively than we used to. There is no point in more mature people (and I recognize that I am rapidly becoming one of them!) saying – well, we went to traditional services all our lives and it worked for us. We have to look at the evidence. The evidence is that whilst it might have worked for them, it is clearly not working for their children and grandchildren. I love to ask these people, somewhat mischievously, where their children go to church because I know the answer – they don't. I then ask them to think about why that might be, or even to ask their children why they no longer attend? We often don't want to ask those questions, because we don't want the answers.

I feel that it is my life's work, at least for the next eleven years until retirement (not that I'm counting!) to ensure that when I leave it, I leave the Dioceses and the church at large a better place than when I arrived. This is a collaborative task and not just down to me, but it is dependent in these days on good, strong, hopeful leadership – like any institution, and you at DCU will understand this. The leader determines the culture. It is not all down to you, but it is not to be shirked. As someone whispered to me coming out of Christ Church cathedral after my consecration: 'you're management now'. That is so true. I get opportunities I have never had before and never will again once I leave office. I also get most of the blame. That is leadership. I have to take that on the chin. In a recent survey (in the church context) of what is required of excellent leadership, the top three requirements were as follows: 1. an adaptive style of leadership ie being able to adapt to massive cultural and ecclesiastical change and still lead 2. Emotional intelligence 3. The ability to think strategically. I imagine that fifty years ago those survey results would have looked very different indeed. We need to be able to adapt to change in order to finish well – it is easy to start well, but it is much more challenging to finish what you have started with excellence.

One of the books that I have very much enjoyed recently and it is in relation to the capacity of social media to destroy you, something of which I am very much aware, is the book: 'So you've been publicly shamed' by Jon Ronson which is a fascinating treatise on the power and viciousness of social media. And because of that inherent danger when we do social media at all in leadership he says this: 'we are creating a world where the smartest way to survive is to be bland.' Isn't that so true? We have all seen people absolutely destroyed by a careless comment on Twitter or Facebook, and there is no mercy, no margin of error. You say the wrong thing, you're finished. And what I fear from that is exactly what that quote says – we will become so afraid to give our opinion that we end up being utterly, utterly bland. Leadership is not to fall into this trap. We should say what we mean, and mean what we say – especially in the church sector.

I do, though, very firmly keep my feet on the ground. When your title is Most Reverend, and you are the third most senior person in the Church of Ireland, this is even more vital. People do not do well with pomp and ceremony any more, and I do deliberately cultivate an informal culture in the Dioceses. If we are secure in ourselves and in our faith, then we should not have to find our meaning in titles and officialdom. So I recognize that the church has a long way to go. I am up for the challenge. I am hopeful that I can make a small but significant difference. But in the midst of that sometimes pressurized environment, I need to make sure I look after myself and ensure that my clergy do too, and this is one of my mantras.

I have a personal coach who has been invaluable in guiding me through these early years of senior leadership. One of the things that she has taught me is to ask of myself and of others the vital question: how is my leadership experienced by you? We can have all sorts of aims and objectives, and we can think we are one kind of leader, but what really matters is how people actually experience you. But you do have to be brave enough for the answers! I

also have a small group of four who were ordained together twenty years ago and we meet regularly to support and pray for one another. I take regular retreats and attend conferences for my own learning, and I have been thinking since I was born of doing a further academic qualification, but that remains further down the To Do list than is practicable at the moment.

And I continue to be a normal person – I still attend a creative writing group; I still read fiction voraciously; I still swim; and I still walk the dog. I visit my children and my grandchild. I have a best friend in Australia who I moan to. I go out for coffee with my husband and we read newspapers rather than talk to each other. I treasure my holidays. I am a very ordinary, normal person. I have a bucket list, and as I get well into my fifties I am ticking some of them off! I have now owned a sports car – my husband bought me an mx5 for my 50th birthday and that was one of the most joyous moments of my life. I didn't want to die without ever owning a sports car! Last year I did a tandem skydive. I think I am the only bishop ever to have done that! I had always wanted to do one, and my son, who at the time lived in Australia, sent me a voucher for my birthday – so I had to do it!! It also was one of the most joyous moments of my life! A few weeks ago I had afternoon tea in the Ritz with my daughter. So far, the fifties have been excellent! I have a great life!

None of us know what is around the corner. One of my very dear friends died a few weeks ago with Motor Neurone Disease, and that was painful to watch. For me, my Christian faith has helped me through many dark times and I believe it all as strongly as I did when I discovered it at the age of 19. I love the phrase – a leader is a dealer in hope, and I truly believe that. You have to have self-belief and vision, and you have to believe there is a better way and point the institution in that direction. I am privileged to have a position of leadership and to have some responsibility for the way the Christian church goes in these new challenges of the 21st century. I am up for this. I still on occasion, do get a kick out of being the only woman on the House of Bishops, but I hope and pray that I will be joined soon by at least one more – but I will make sure they love to talk about shopping and hate sport!

I hope that this has not just been information – but that it has also been inspiration. Facts are useful but they are limited. Ordinary lives, and personal stories, are the transformative bit. And apart from all that I have said, I think that leadership is great fun. Life has to be fun. Excuse the final religious bit, but Jesus promised his followers life in all its fullness, and I am not prepared to live a mediocre life. I want it to be amazing! And so far, it's looking good. May yours be amazing too! Let's not be the bland leading the bland. Let's you and I lead - Feel the fear, and do it anyway.

Thank you so much for your patience and willingness to listen to, of all things in an academic institution, a Bishop - who doesn't have all the answers, but sincerely wants to ask the right questions. I feel truly privileged to be a woman in leadership, and to be a woman of faith. Thank you for having me.