

The Archbishop of Armagh's Presidential Address at the Church of Ireland General Synod, Dún Laoghaire, 12th May 2016

In welcoming you all to this General Synod, may I begin by giving a particular welcome to those who are our visitors from other Christian traditions. We are delighted to have you with us. I believe that in the world in which we live it is more than ever essential that, as different Christian traditions, we seek to know each other better, to learn more and more from one another, to set ourselves common tasks in the furtherance of the work of Kingdom of God on earth, to pray together, and to grow in mutual affection and love in the service of Jesus Christ. As we embark on our work as a General Synod, we who are members of synod need to remember that this synod is not all about us.

On this island, we are at present in the midst of what has become widely known as a 'decade of centenaries', running from the Ulster Covenant of 1912 through to the civil war in the then Irish Free State which reached its conclusion in May 1923. This year, 2016, is central to these commemorations as the centenaries of both the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme fall within weeks of one another. They have both moved into history and historical interpretation as crucially symbolic events in the modern history of our island. I would want to suggest, as someone who has rather more than a dilettante interest in the history of this period, that neither event should be commemorated or interpreted through the lens of a single narrative. They were both highly complex affairs, both in the history of the events themselves, and also in subsequent interpretations of those events – but also deeply symbolic and emblematic and we have all been shaped in different ways and to differing degrees by them.

In just over a month from now, I will have the privilege, along with Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, of leading a group of young people from Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic backgrounds, from both jurisdictions, on a three day journey which will take us from these shores to the battlefields of the Somme. That journey will start in Glasnevin cemetery at the new memorial wall that remembers by name all those who died at the Easter Rising in Dublin 1916 – Irish, British, military and civilian. We will then take a flight to Belgium and travel down to the battlefields of the Somme, where men from both traditions and both parts of this island fought and died together, side by side. Before we return home we will pause for a time of reflection at the Irish Peace Park in Messines. A shared journey on so many different levels, reflecting on our past but also looking to how we can shape our future. George Bernard Shaw once said, 'We are made wise not by the recollection of our past but by the responsibility for our future.' But the reality is that we are all shaped in some way or another by our history. I think it is a post-modernist nonsense to suggest that we can somehow begin 'reality' with ourselves. The real gift is surely to recognise the shaping that we have received by our past (for better or worse), to interrogate it, and to decide upon how this may and should influence our future, so that we in our generation may contribute to the shaping of a wider future. This is as true in the life of the Church as in the life of a nation. We as the Church of Ireland have been shaped by previous generations, by events both inside and outside the life of the Church, and by the influence of others upon us.

As many of you know, a project which I am particularly enthusiastic about concerns the Church of Ireland undergoing a comprehensive, objective and external review of itself as a Church community. This should take place before our own commemorations in 2019 – not a centenary in this case, but a sesquicentenary – marking 150 years since the disestablishment

of the Church of Ireland. It would mean inviting others from outside the Church of Ireland to look at us, lovingly but also critically, to tell us where we as a Christian tradition on this island need to strike out in new directions, while also valuing what we have received through succeeding generations of men and women who sought God's glory in faithful service of Christ and his Church.

The past year has seen the countries of Europe face new and serious challenges. There is of course the possibility that the European Union will fracture further, and this is particularly to the forefront of peoples' minds in the light of the forthcoming referendum on British withdrawal. Regardless of one's views on the matter, there can be no doubt that life on this island, and hence in our Church, may be rendered very different if the referendum in June results in the United Kingdom moving outside the European Union. As in every election and referendum, all citizens have a duty to consider carefully the consequences of their decision-making for the whole community, while also ensuring that they do not neglect the privilege they have been given as voters in a democratic system of government.

Apart from this particular political issue, we must all face up to the responsibilities we have been given for those who have come to western Europe, in the hope of finding safety and security, as they flee from violence and destruction in their own countries. It can never be permissible for Christians to imagine that refugees should not be 'our problem'. In the first place, it is the countries of the west that have, over decades, exacerbated the political situation in most of those countries that are now disintegrating before our eyes, and we cannot now pretend that we have no moral responsibilities. But, far more importantly, we need to recall that Christ himself was always more at home with those who were suffering and outside the realm of social or religious respectability than with the comfortable and complacent insiders. In so many ways he himself was an outsider, and he died on the cross as one rejected by all around him. God does not distinguish, in his love, between those we think of as 'like us' and those we think of as somehow different. We cannot turn our backs on dire need before our eyes; we are all made, equally, in the image of God. It is difficult to be certain what responsibilities we as a Church may have to shoulder as time goes on but, in the meantime, I am grateful to the Bishops of Derry and Tuam and those with whom they are working, as they monitor the realities of those who are arriving in Ireland as refugees.

As I have said on many occasions over the past couple of years, the Church of Ireland must look beyond its own self-interest and its own survival. It must reach upwards to God in trust. It must look beyond itself in every way. Not least, it must look beyond the present into the future to which we believe God is calling us.

In this context, I am aware that there may be some misunderstanding among a number of people as to the nature and scope of the 'Long-Term Church' project on which we as a Church are embarked. We need to be very clear that we should never imagine that the mission of the Church throughout every diocese and local community can somehow be 'achieved' by a central Church initiative. It is almost always in a local context – whether diocese, parish, or other local community or even through an event – that men, women and children are enabled to meet Jesus Christ and to grow into a greater maturity as his disciples. How this will happen will inevitably be different according to place and context.

What the central Church can and should do, however, is to ensure that it gives as much support and structural shape as it can achieve, in order to serve local communities in their mission and service to the world. This is the thinking behind the Long-Term Church venture.

We should be thinking into the mid-term and even into the long-term with confidence in the purposes of God for the future of the Church of Ireland. I have a personal dislike of the phrase 'fit for purpose' in the context of the Church (as it rather seems to denigrate the efforts and work of many people who selflessly serve Christ with energy and commitment), and so I prefer the image of seeking to re-shape some of our structures so that they may more effectively serve the wider life, outreach and witness of the Church into the long term, hence the strap-line for Long-Term Church, 'Shaping to Serve'. We have, as I have suggested, been shaped by the heritage we have received. While maintaining an essential continuity with that legacy, we need to play our part, with God's help and guidance, in continuing the work of shaping the Church for the future.

A great deal has already been done under the heading of Long-Term Church, some of which relates to initiatives that had begun before this project had been articulated, but which nevertheless can be seen as being within this overarching concept. In this category, there has been a very useful computerising of the RCB's database of all Church property. This is of tremendous value, not only for parishes and diocese (in addition to the central Church), in their collective stewardship and management of Church property. It will also be of great benefit in establishing the nature of our legal trusts, a matter of concern to the commissioners for charities in both Northern Ireland and the Republic. From this perspective it is also important that members of Select Vestries are fully aware of their responsibilities, not only in Church law but also in the civil law, and the first section within the ongoing Parish Handbook project – that part dealing with the responsibilities of Select Vestry members – should be in the hands of parishes within the next few months.

New civil responsibility for the Church, particularly in relation to greater accountability in support of its charity status, has meant that much work has been done in our different dioceses to prepare for new methods of reporting on our finances and structural activities. This has had a beneficial concomitant value in that parishes and dioceses will have to report to the civil authorities, not simply on the financial management of their assets but also on the work and service that they undertake, if they wish to retain charitable status. This will indeed concentrate minds on what is being done by the Church at local level for more than the dubious end of its own self-perpetuation. Draft templates for use in this regard are therefore in the process of preparation. We all need to take a long and hard look at ourselves, as individuals and as communities, to evaluate just what we are doing in forwarding the mission of the Church in our localities and, ironically, it may be that we will be grateful to the state authorities for helping us to undertake such rigorous self-examination.

As part of the movement to make the work of the Church as a whole more accessible to all its members into the future, a group is now looking at how we could make the Constitution of the Church of Ireland more 'approachable'. That we need a Constitution and statute law is undeniable, but are there ways in which these may be made as little esoteric as necessary? We are fortunate that Sir Paul Girvan, former High Court justice in Northern Ireland, has, in company with a small reference group, kindly agreed to investigate the possibilities of how this might be done, without beginning the process of an entire re-writing of a Constitution, which would indeed take decades of the General Synod's time and attention.

Initiatives have been taken in other areas. There is the growing realisation that any body of the size of the Church of Ireland needs a centralised Human Resources capability. We have already seen aspects of this in the work done on a Dignity Charter and also in relation to long-term illness of clergy, but a further step has been taken and the Representative Church

Body has now advertised the post of an HR advisor for the Church of Ireland. In addition, in a world becoming increasingly complex in areas of compliance with civil law, the role of a Compliance and Resource coordinator has been created, and it is a pleasure to welcome Ms Elaine Whitehouse into this new post. Work is also being undertaken to encourage parishes that wish to consider development programmes and the services of Ms Nicola Brown have been enlisted as a consultant for those parishes that wish to consider their own long-term priorities. It scarcely needs to be said that resources may indeed be made available for the use of the whole Church, but their value will be in the degree to which the local communities of the Church avail of such crucial resources.

For some time, consideration has been given as to how modern technology might enable members of central committees to participate more readily in the work of such committees, without the need to travel to every meeting. Tele-conferencing has long been available, but there are today more sophisticated modes of video-conferencing which serve to make the immediacy of such participation far greater. The central Church is investing in this technology, with the hope of having a number of venues in different parts of Ireland equipped with this technology. Individuals will also be able to participate in such meetings using their own computers. The purpose is not simply to save time, energy and money on over-frequent travel (although it will certainly achieve this end), and it is certainly not in question that meetings will continue to be held with the physical presence of all the membership being desirable. The use of modern technology should however mean that more people will be available for shorter meetings, and also that people who might not be able to make day-long trips to central meetings on a regular basis would consider becoming members of such committees or boards. My hope is that younger people may in this way be encouraged to involve themselves in the life and work of the central Church.

This General Synod sees the final weeks of Mr Adrian Clements' tenure as Chief Officer of the Representative Church Body and Secretary-General of the Church of Ireland. I hope that we all realise the massive contribution that he has made to the Church in this role. His deep understanding of the Church, his effectiveness as an administrator and strategist, and his warmth and courteousness for all with whom he has contact, have all made a great impact on the life of the Church. In company with Mr Robert Neill, who is also nearing the conclusion of his chairmanship of the Executive Committee of the Representative Church Body, he has done an immeasurable service to us all in making the two different 'arms' of the Church of Ireland – the Representative Church Body and the General Synod with their respective responsibilities – not only truly comfortable with one another in every respect, but appreciating fully that they are working in creative tandem with one another for the purposes of the Kingdom of God. We now wish Adrian and Patricia every happiness in Adrian's retirement. And in this context I wish to thank Mr Robert Neill for his wonderful contribution to the Church, as chairman of the Executive Committee. From a Primate's perspective, he and our outgoing Chief Officer have been tremendously encouraging and motivating colleagues. I would also wish the Chief Officer to convey the thanks of this Synod to his staff, in both Dublin and in Belfast, for their continuing work on behalf of the Church of Ireland. Their hard work, efficiency and unfailing courtesy should never be taken for granted by any of us. We are all in their debt.

It is of course a great pleasure to welcome now to our midst Mr David Ritchie, our new Chief Officer and Secretary-General. He comes to us with a formidable array of skills and experience, in finance, in engineering, in financial management, with humanitarian projects, and even in the study of theology... I truly believe that we are extremely fortunate in

acquiring his huge expertise, and we both welcome David and wish him happiness and fulfilment in the years ahead.

As we remember those who in the past have given service to the Church of Ireland, we give thanks to God for the life, work and witness of those Synod members whose deaths have occurred in this past year, Mr Malcolm Cairns of Armagh Diocese, a committed and hard-working member of his parish and community in Dungannon, and also Mrs Margaret Stephens of the Dioceses of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory, a regular and valued participant in many synod debates. We remember also Canon Edgar Turner, a familiar face at General Synod (even in a lengthy and busy retirement) until last year's synod, as a remarkable figure in the life of the Church. Gifted with a clear mind that was stocked with information of every kind, he was a living resource that many of us called upon regularly for practical guidance and legal reassurance. His depth of knowledge was matched by a great courtesy and humanity, and a warm interest in people. And we remember also with gratitude Mr Trevor Morrow from Limerick Diocese who served his diocese over many years in many capacities. He was a member of this General Synod for more than forty years. Many of us associate him with his service to the Church Unity Committee (now the Commission for Unity and Dialogue) on which he served for many years. Bishop Peter Barrett, one-time Bishop of Cashel and Ossory died suddenly, late last year. Many benefitted greatly from his pastoral care and ministry in different parts of Ireland over more than twenty years, and for this we give thanks to God. As in trust and faith we commend those who have died to God's love, we remember all who have been bereaved by their departure from this earth.

A week ago, on Ascension Day, I had the privilege of representing the Church of Ireland at a large and invigorating service in All Souls' Church, Langham Place in London. It was in celebration of one hundred and fifty years of Reader Ministry in these islands. Although it was some time later, early in the twentieth century, that reader ministry became a major feature of Church of Ireland ministry, it was of some interest for me to discover that there was a definite Irish connection with the decision on Ascension Day 1866 to initiate a form of Reader Ministry that we recognise today as central to the life of most Anglican provinces. Remembering of course that 1866 was three years before the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, it is of significance that two of those who attended the meeting of archbishops and bishops at Lambeth Palace that authorised the formation of a reader ministry were the then Archbishop of Armagh and the then Bishop of Derry and Raphoe. For me, it was a reminder of how much we have been enriched and indeed shaped by the ministry of readers in this part of the Anglican Communion. But it is also of importance to realise that the original vision for readers was that they would be an evangelistic face of the Church outside the buildings and traditional worship of the Church. Facing an increasingly unchurched society it was intended that the readers might be catechists and teachers; they were to guide others towards Christ in other contexts than formal worship. Much of this sounds remarkably similar to the ideas now being considered with regard to Pioneer ministries. What goes around does indeed come around. We need to be ready for surprises in the life of the Church.

As we now begin our work in synod, we are also approaching the Festival of Pentecost. And we would therefore do well to remind ourselves that all our planning and all our strategising is of little avail if we do not also place ourselves at the disposal of the Holy Spirit. Cardinal Leo Suenens, one of the great Roman Catholic proponents of the modern charismatic movement memorably commented that he would have liked to add a phrase to the creeds. Not only do we believe in the Holy Spirit, he suggested, but we should also express belief in 'the surprises of the Holy Spirit'. I might perhaps suggest an addition to Cardinal Suenens'

phrase. We should believe in the surprises of the Holy Spirit, and our belief should be as much in the surprises of the Holy Spirit that are unwelcome, as in those surprises that we might welcome! In the Church of Ireland, we are not keenly attuned to the possibility of surprises, not even welcome surprises. But if we truly believe in the Holy Spirit, we must believe in surprises, and certainly General Synod and our participation in this Synod can never be all about us, but rather centred and focussed on the glory of God.

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