

**Presidential Address**  
**Archbishop John McDowell**

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

I've begun my General Synod addresses over the past three years by saying either how strange it was to be meeting as a General Synod wholly online or, last year, how strange it was for the Synod to be meeting wholly in person. So, in the interests of consistency I should now say how strange it will be to chairing a General Synod which is in person for two days and online for one or possibly two nights later in the month. You might also have noticed the cunning plan to keep the Synod from meeting in Armagh for as long as possible, until the Honorary Secretaries are satisfied that I can chair it competently and won't make a fool of myself in front of the home crowd. As you can tell, there's no end of the varied excitement which being President of the General Synod brings.

However, I can say without any sense of irony that it is very good to be meeting here in Wexford as guests of the Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory. We are very grateful to Bishop Adrian and all those from this part of the world who have welcomed us so warmly, not least the rector, the Revd Norman McCausland, and his colleagues in St Iberius's for facilitating the General Synod Eucharist.

Although, unlike in the majority tradition on this island, it's not usual for a bishop or archbishop to choose a theme for his or her tenure of office, I had said at that rather weird General Synod in 2020 that I wished to focus on reconciliation and gratitude. There is much on our island that needs to be reconciled and much to give thanks for. Of course, there is also a huge amount of straightforward, ordinary, boring work to do for each of us – lay and ordained – and there is such a thing as the grace of efficiency.

Both as Primate and as a diocesan bishop, I am acutely aware of the dedication of Church of Ireland people (by the way there is no such thing as an ordinary Church of Ireland person) in not only making the wheels turn, but also in their sheer dedication and commitment to their parishes and communities. It will not be the first time I've had to say that the work of compliance alone has increased exponentially and that clergy and officeholders of only twenty years ago would hardly recognise the 'compliance landscape' which their counterparts of today have to negotiate. For some small parishes and voluntary organisations, it can be a form of slow attrition until no volunteers can be found to meet the significant bureaucratic burden.

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However, all of that has to be set in the wider perspective of the task we have been given to exercise our vocation in contemporary Ireland, north and south. It has become a bit of a cliché to say that, as the Body of Christ, we are his hands and his feet in the communities where Providence has placed us. But it is also true that we are his lips and his heart. That is to say, the people who speak with his voice into a world which hasn't yet managed to find its bearings after three or so years of unforeseen turbulence; and the people who see so many sheep without a shepherd and who want not to criticise them, and make them feel even worse than they are feeling already, but to care for them.

**Pioneer Ministry**

I can remember saying back in 2020-2021 that when I was asked what sort of church we would be as we emerged from lockdowns and many restrictions on our activities, I usually replied that it was too early to say. Perhaps it is possible to say a little bit more now. On the positive side we have come through the slow motion cataclysm much better than we had anticipated, though not without scars and a couple of open wounds. Indeed to a large extent we are almost exactly the way we were but with fewer people. Not drastically fewer and not radically changed. In almost every sense that is a good thing, and the one way in which it is not so good is not fatal.

The older Churches on this island, including the Church of Ireland, have been in numerical decline for many years. As yet there is no way to measure whether we have increased or decreased in faith, hope and love but my own experience has been the former; that we have deepened our witness in these ways. However, numbers matter too. They are not everything, but in light of the Great Commission, they aren't nothing either. Fortunately, God has heard our prayer and has indeed "gone before us...with his most gracious favour", so that we are not frantically scrambling around looking for an answer.

Long before Covid the seeds were being sown around the idea what we are now calling Pioneer Ministry. The long-term trends of attendance were being noted and formal and informal conversations were taking place in the House of Bishops, in conferences and seminars and of course, in this Synod. A great deal of that seed sowing was done by Bishop Patrick Rooke, before his retirement as Bishop of Tuam, Killala, and Achonry, and I want to pay tribute to Patrick for his vision and his drive in taking the conversation from a theoretical to a very practical one through the most inaptly named IDLE (Inter Diocesan Learning Experience) process.

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If you'll forgive the mixing of metaphors, the seeds have been sown, and now the foundations are being laid for the "mainstreaming" of this initiative into the DNA of the Church of Ireland in the form of the terms of reference of Pioneer Ministry. I am not going to go into detail in this address about this subject which will be very ably laid before Synod later in our proceedings, except to say that, as well as coming in various stages of development to successive General Synods, it has been the subject of rigorous scrutiny and debate by the Standing Committee, the Representative Body and the House of Bishops. The fact that it is the Church Army with whom we as a Church are to be partners for the formation and training elements of the Pioneer Ministry Initiative is a source of much gratitude and reassurance. I know that Synod will give the initiative its close attention.

Pioneer Ministry is one of the outcomes of what might be described as an honest look at ourselves – where we fit into the world we are called to serve and what form that service might take – because if we are not a blessing to the communities in which we live, then history seems to suggest that we will be a curse, or at best an irrelevance. And we must work this out for ourselves as we come to the realisation that history is not simply a discipline to be studied or a process to be endured. Instead, it is a thing to be made – made by our conscious choices, by our importuning voices which express the compassion of our Lord.

You see there are no models or precedents. Small as we have become, we are not in the same position as the early Church. The influence of the Church may not be very great, but we are in no sense in the position of complete civic insignificance and vulnerability as was the Church as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles or the Letters of St Paul. We cannot simply wish away that great thousand-year experience and experiment which was called Christendom.

But of course, neither are the Churches one of the great engines of the civic world or of the State which we once were in Ireland until not that long ago. We need both a realistic understanding of how we are viewed in the modern world and a realistic grasp of the spiritual gifts we bring. Above all, we need to place a very high value on spiritual freedom – by which I mean a free response to the appeal of God's love in His Son. We have been given limitless spiritual resources but the minute they are used in any even remotely coercive or overbearing way, then they turn to dust in our hands and to ashes in our mouths. It is the meek who inherit the earth and not those who are proud of their humility.

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I recently came across an example of that meekness, by which I mean acknowledging the depth one's gifts but only ever using them for the common good rather than for personal prestige.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending a conference at my alma mater, the Queen's University of Belfast, to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. It was attended by Bill and Hillary Clinton, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and three of his predecessors, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and many of his predecessors, right back to Peter Mandelson and a host of other luminaries.

But the highlight of the event was a speech given by Senator George Mitchell who had chaired the multi-party talks which led to the signing of the Agreement on 10th April 1998. He is in his ninetieth year and has been suffering from leukaemia for the past three years. He told us of how he had flown home to the United States in October 1997 so he could be with his wife Heather, for the birth of their only child, a son.

Things had not been going well in the negotiations in Belfast. Indeed in typically brusque style someone from Belfast had said to him not long before: "You haven't managed to broker an agreement, so when are you going home?" He told his wife that he was going to ask for a meeting with the President to say that he had failed and that it was time to call it quits.

His wife had been aware of his concerns and she reminded him that on that same day when their son was born, sixty-one children had been born in Northern Ireland. "George, I will take good care of our son. But in the meantime you have to go back one more time for the sake of those children."

He did come back and a few months later the multi-party agreement and the international treaty between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Ireland were signed. The multi-party agreement was achieved at least in part because of the sacrifices offered by George Mitchell and his wife Heather. Sacrifices of mind and soul and body.

Of course you may not agree with the political assumptions in that story, but that is not the point. We can all make good, bad or indifferent political assumptions and decisions and only time will tell how good they were. But the spirit in which we do such things is so important, because sacrifice is at the heart of the nature of God, and is therefore at the heart of all things. Sacrifice is the ultimate reality. At the heart of the new city, the heavenly Jerusalem, a King sits

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on a throne...and that king is the Lamb that was slain to bring reconciliation and peace; to put back together things were broken apart.

Love and sacrifice are the hidden things that lie at the foundation of the world, and faith – your faith and mine – is the disruptive bringing to bear of the sacrifice which lies at the heart of the Trinity, on the spurious stability of civilisation. Sacrifice is the inner structure of love; the yielding up of something so as to possess it more deeply. And the peace which it brings is not a glassy calm; it is a mighty confidence that equips us for every task we have been given at the hand of the Prince of Peace.

Speaking for myself and my own role in occasionally having to say something in the public square, I can only say how conscious I am of being Primate of All Ireland, and how what I say will be heard in Coleraine and in Cork. No doubt I do not always get it just right, yet I am convinced that the voice of the Churches, especially when we speak together, is a voice that has something to contribute.

During the course of public debate last year on a fairly controversial subject across these islands I tried to outline the mode of address which I felt was appropriate to how as a Church Leader (although that is itself a problematic term) should use when participating in debates on public issues:

‘As a disciple of Jesus Christ who also happens to be a Church Leader, the principal questions which I need to ask myself at this time are, “how will what I do or say express my discipleship of Jesus Christ?” and “how will it contribute to the common good?”

Church Leaders are not party political figures nor are we the accredited representatives of any political community. I would guess that the majority of Church of Ireland people in Northern Ireland are unionists of one sort or another and most Church of Ireland people in the Republic of Ireland are broadly nationalist. Probably there is also a substantial minority (particularly) of under-40s in both jurisdictions who would class themselves as “neither” or “other”. Fortunately there are a large number of elected representatives from political parties or political communities who are able and willing to speak for all these groups.

So as a Church Leader I do not speak for, with, or to the Church, or to broader society in that way. It is not for me as a Church Leader to parade the political affiliation of

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Church of Ireland people in those terms. In many ways, their political or constitutional affiliation is none of my business. This alignment of denominational and political affiliation has been a feature of our history and has only succeeded in making many in society suspicious of where the Church's conclusive loyalty really lies. In doing so, it has impeded the Church's usefulness in the world and has at times also cheapened the Gospel and its implications.

The God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ is not a Unionist or a Nationalist, or a 'Neither'. He is the Sovereign Lord of all peoples, a God of justice and generosity, who desires the good of all. For those of us whose churches are organised on an all-island basis, this is especially important to remember.'

However, in order to be a blessing and not a curse to the world, and to help shape the communities and countries in which we live, we must reshape our own life and for that reason perhaps it is worthwhile reflecting on the common interests of church and society, or where these concerns overlap – that is in the area of citizenship. Of what it means to be a good citizen. What are the distinguishing characteristics of a citizen in the modern world? In the ancient world, the world, say, of the New Testament, the answer was obvious enough. A citizen was someone who was not a slave. He or she was someone whose choices and identity weren't owned by someone else.

Or, as the lawyers today would say, someone who had the liberty to dispose of his or her own acts. Just like a citizen in the ancient world a modern citizen is someone who has a voice in the community, who has certain legal protections and who has a significant say in the choices of his or her own life. So the citizen has the personal dignity of making a contribution to the community or society where they live – in the vision shared by the community. To be a citizen is to be responsible for maintaining your environment, both your personal and social environment.

And the idea of citizenship was very important in the early days of Christianity. The Greek word which we translate as 'church' was the word used in the ancient world for an assembly of citizens. The Church didn't make up a new word for what they understood themselves to be when they gathered for worship or for debate; they simply used the familiar word that meant a

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gathering of citizens – of people who were guaranteed a voice and guaranteed responsibility. From the very start the Church said to its members that, regardless of the political arrangements around you, there is another civic space in which you have non-negotiable rights and a gift to share, a place where you have the dignity of being a decision-maker, able to contribute to the place where you live. And all of this had consequences for the wider community. Today it still has consequences for the communities you and I are part of.

Early Christianity was not an opting out of political or social life and conversation. It did not aim to remove people from civic responsibility, but Christianity is where the deepest kind of civic responsibility was nurtured and carried out into the world. In some cases, the depth of that citizenship came into conflict with the political expectations of the State with very tragic results. That is one of the reasons why Christianity almost disappears from the official record between the ending of the canonical period until the reign of Constantine, surfacing only sporadically in the record of martyrdoms.

Part of the purpose of Christian community is to learn to treat people as capable of civic dignity and freedom; as people capable of contributing to their nearer and wider social and political environment by free decision taken in consultation. From that point of view, the citizen assemblies which we call ‘the Church’, including this General Synod, are places where we argue and debate about what we understand is good for the whole of society.

And the new things we have to bring need not be and should not be in conflict with our older gifts. There has been a growing interest recently in spiritual tourism and in what might be thought of as the original form of spiritual tourism – pilgrimage. In a world full of speed and deadlines, fast food, transactions, and consumerism, people seem to be waking up to the need to slow down and for being relational rather than transactional. Pilgrimage, an activity where one engages in a journey of meaningfulness, is an antidote to a materialistic world.

We are blessed in the Church of Ireland to have many places of pilgrimage in our care, these places are witnesses to the good news that have spoken quietly through the generations, their very presence proclaiming our connection to something greater. Many people who have wandered away from church institutions are seeking such a relational experience as the Church

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is called to proclaim and offer. The very people who may be receptive to what the Church has to say to the world are those who are drawn to this modern revival of pilgrimage.

As well as many of our churches being destinations of pilgrimage, we also have many churches that are close to or alongside historic pilgrim paths whose popularity, having waned for so long, are now growing again. These churches and this new popularity of pilgrimage offers us a wonderful opportunity for engagement and maybe many opportunities for pioneer ministry to those who may have wandered away from the Church or been brought up away from the Church, who might be receptive to our message, to whom we have something to say and whom may have the ears to listen.

I know that Máirt Hanley and the people behind the Community of Brendan the Navigator (Cumann Breandan Naofa) are planning to do some work to connect churches with an interest and perhaps a role to play in such an outreach. This should fit in neatly with the Church's Pioneer Ministry work and the community hopes that some of the Pioneer Ministry projects would have a pilgrimage aspect, which they will keenly support.

The Body of Christ. His voice and His Heart; remembering that Jesus spoke with such power because He loved silence.

Pioneer Ministry, pilgrimage, and civic involvement are all ways in which a Church like ours, which expresses its mission largely in terms of pastoral engagement, can be reshaped for its contemporary vocation by deepening our Catholic and Apostolic inheritance. Another test of our seriousness in that vocation will be to ensure that our organs of governance and the general life of our Church reflects the ethnic diversity of this island more fully.

It has been said again and again that the ethnic and cultural make up of this island has changed almost beyond recognition. That begs the question of why so few people of colour are in our Sunday congregations or on vestries, committees and synods. Even we try to excuse ourselves by noting that there are few enough people from other ethnicities in our Church, we need to ask why that is the case. People from such backgrounds come to this island with a lively faith and with fresh ideas and, being honest with ourselves, many try us and end up going elsewhere.

At Confirmation services Sunday by Sunday, I say that it will be the parish's "responsibility to encourage the newly confirmed in their faith so that the whole church may be built up recognising the diverse gifts of all its members". The same should be true of the 'newly arrived'



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– at the very least to ensure that they don't spend the whole of their time in the Church of Ireland in the waiting room.

I make many excuses to myself about why this is so and have come to the conclusion that prejudices – including my own – are very deep seated and therefore out of view. As such I should treat prejudice a bit like I treated Covid: assume I have it, realise how poisonous and infectious it is, and do everything to guard against it in order to eradicate it.

It has been a privilege to convene the little reference group of clergy, readers and others from a great diversity of ethnic backgrounds and from all over the Church of Ireland to help and advise me in this task as we try to 'mainstream' the work so that it becomes less of a project and becomes more and more part of the ordinary business of every committee and responsible body within the Church.

The ethnic diversity challenge is a newish one and the work of integration is really only beginning. However one very specific area of work which has been reported to the General Synod over the past ten years has now come to an end in the winding up of the Centenaries Working Group. In Ireland, the past is not a foreign country. It is often tight on our heels and we have a peculiar genius for finding a reason from the past to stop the present from becoming the future. We turn political debate and sometime turn even the worship of the living God into a form of ancestor worship.

For that reason, back in 2012 when the Decade of Centenaries began we, as a Church approached the whole project with a good deal of caution. However over the past ten years, we have engaged very constructively with the historical events under consideration and with the many community, academic and civic bodies which have been involved in a similar task.

Our engagement has been consistent and nuanced and, most importantly, it was shaped out of our authentic pastoral experience. In the many events, lectures, publications and seminars which we organised as a Church we respected the nuances and complexities of the past and were never afraid to be surprised by history. Many of the events which we considered had the potential to flare up again in quite destructive ways in the present. I think we are all indebted to the judicious chairmanship of the Bishop of Cork in how the most recent commemorations have been handled.

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Another aspect of our past which can suddenly resurface in the present is around the subject of Safeguarding. I think it is fair to say that as a Church we have been doing our best to ensure that our current policies and practices for safeguarding both children and adults who find themselves vulnerable are modelled on good practice worldwide. We have professional staff working at the centre of the Church to advise and to provide guidance. The Safeguarding Board, which includes a number of outside experts, meets around eight times a year to consider and update policies; it has a high degree of independence in its latitude for action. The Representative Body and the Allocations Committee are alive to the resources needed to carry out the work of Safeguarding both efficiently and compassionately.

The last topic I wish to touch on before I mercifully conclude may well be the most important of all, because it affects the good of all: creation care. This will require inspiration and engagement at all levels of the Church. For instance, we have had an environmental policy in relation to our investments for many years and it is regularly updated and presented to General Synod for amendment and approval.

In a further development the RCB as a whole has devised a Climate Change Policy to cover all of its operations (not simply investments) which no doubt will be discussed during the Report of the RB in one of our online sessions later in the month.

One of the theological contributions of the Anglican Communion to global mission is our Five Marks of Mission, summarised as to: tell, teach, tend, transform and to treasure. This last mark of mission, treasure, is explained as safeguarding and caring for creation. Over the last decade, many of us have come to realise the impact our lifestyle is having on the planet, and as we are reminded this is the only planet that we have and share with other peoples and with God's creation. The Five Marks of Mission recognise our duty as God's people to safeguard and protect God's creation. Yet, we are left with the question of how to live, work and worship in a manner that protects and respects creation. Specifically for the Representative Church Body: what role can we play in leading, encouraging and resourcing parishes in their fulfilment of this mission?

Following consideration by the RB Executive Committee it was agreed to focus on the four high impact and tangible categories of energy usage, transportation, waste, and biodiversity. In terms of leadership, the RCB will seek to share stories from across the Church of Ireland to show what can be done. In terms of guidance, the office will prepare resources to be published

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on Parish Resources, and in terms of grants, the Church Fabric and Development Fund will provide financial support for diocesan initiatives (such as the Flourish project in Armagh), conferences (such as the Care for Creation Conference), and enhanced property grants to support energy efficiency initiatives for churches. But the RCB can't do this on its own and we are grateful to all those, some of whom are members of General Synod, who share a passion for protecting creation and on whom we rely to partner with the RCB in this shared mission.

The work of the RB is of course central to our mission as a Church. But it is not everything and in many ways will be ineffective if the whole practice of creation care does not take hold in our parishes. In many ways the backbone of the Church of Ireland continues to be the rural parish or group of parishes. I have said before that farmers and the farming community are the most visible agents of creation care but are also the most vulnerable when it comes to getting the power balance right between the farmer, the processor, the supermarket and the state. And that is a power imbalance which we as a Church should at least have a say in addressing.

We cannot change the world, but we can change what we are responsible for. It is for that reason that I am looking forward to hearing from the group of young people from Mullingar who have been working on and developing the Lighten our Darkness creation care programme in and around Mullingar. They will have much to say to us in their creative enthusiasm and no doubt Canon Alastair Graham will tell us anything that they have left out.

We have begun a bit of a copycat programme in the Diocese of Armagh, and called it Flourish. Like Lighten our Darkness, it is an intentional way of trying to involve parishes in creative ways to care for the creation which God gave to us as "good" and which we are in danger of leaving to our grandchildren as "very bad". It would be my heart's desire that dioceses and parishes throughout the Church of Ireland would adopt similar projects adapted to their own circumstances so that we can say we have done our little bit to allow "the whole earth to praise His Name."

In closing I have to say that this has been a year in which I have been involved in some momentous occasions and events in Northern Ireland, Ireland and in Great Britain, not least in the memorial services and funeral of her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth and at the recent Coronation of King Charles and Queen Camilla. As part of the Irish Church Leaders Group, I have also had meetings with Uachtaráin na hÉireann and engagement of one sort or another with members of the Irish Government and members of the Oireachtas, the Northern Ireland

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Assembly and the Northern Ireland Office. In all of these engagements, both formal and informal, I have tried to reflect the unique perspective which the Church of Ireland brings.

So, thank you for words of encouragement, advice and critical comment which you have given me since we last met; I have no doubt I will hear a few more over the next two days.