

## DIOCESAN SYNOD SPEECH 2026

As I welcome you to our 2026 Synod, I welcome those attending for the first time and welcome our guests from other church traditions and those who come from Church agencies who enhance our synod. You are all most welcome.

The USA is 250 years this year. The Declaration of Independence framed in 1776 was the foundational document of the new Republic. Throughout history Americans have been called back to that foundational document which was elaborated in the US Constitution. At our Synod Service, we were reminded about our foundations in the story told by Jesus of the two house builders. Jesus is described in the Bible as the TEKTON, generally translated as builder, or more specifically as carpenter. In the ancient world the tekton was responsible planning, laying out the foundations and supervising the structural work and the finished details of a building.

Christ is our tekton, our master builder, our foundation. He builds his church and nothing will prevail against it. He calls us to partner with him in this construction work.

The Annual Book of Reports gives us an indication of what we are building with him. It is a very detailed and we can get lost in the detail, and so I want to highlight some aspects.

First, you will notice the prominence given to the local church, the 96 local churches that make up our diocese. Members of Synod represent each of these parishes. These tend to be small scattered faith communities that have stood the test of time. Recently, I reviewed a report drawn up in 1922 about diocesan reorganisation in Kilmore following the partition of Ireland. Remarkably, 82% of the parishes listed in the 1922 report are still in existence and most are regularly open for worship. That speaks of the resilience and stability of our parishes and God's promise to maintain a witness for Him across the generations. Our parishes consist of people who minister for Christ. In our reformed church tradition ministry is for all and it is the role of clergy to equip the people of God for ministry, in the home, in the family in the care of the land and daily work, in learning and in teaching. Our small scattered parishes are platforms for this wide and varied ministry in the name of Christ. Every touch of Jesus leaves a trace in the lives of others and the community. Jesus described his followers as salt and light and beacons of hope on the human landscape.

As your bishop, I want to commend and encourage what goes on in Christ's name in parishes across the diocese. To those who serve in so many capacities, in Select Vestries, those who teach the young in Sunday Schools and youth groups and organisations, to those who share in the ministry of care in visiting the lonely and sick, to those who teach in our schools and serve on Boards of Management. To those

involved in local clubs, societies and interest groups. In our diocesan family we have so many volunteers actively involved in their parishes and local communities. It is one of the indicators of a healthy church and community and I encourage you to get involved for the spirit of the age is not to get involved but to disengage.

We are grateful those who lead in Sunday worship, our parish and diocesan readers who make it possible for many of our churches to be open for worship through the year. Because of the clerical vacancies we have at present I am conscious of the additional work that this has placed on our readers. Last year we lost one of our longstanding and outstanding Diocesan Lay Readers, David Gillespie from Knockvicar. We remember David's family in their loss. To that end we are planning to recruit and train more readers. Archdeacon Ian Berry is leading this drive and we will hear from him later today

I also want to thank my clerical colleagues for their service I am very aware of the caliber and commitment of our clergy. In the past year some of our clergy moved. Archdeacon Hazel moved from Arva to Swanlinbar and was replaced by Rev. Naomi Quinn. Canon Ruth West left Florencecourt to become the rector of the Sligo group of parishes and Dean of Elphin and Ardagh. Rev Sam Peilow became the rector of the Killeshandra group having served his curacy there. Damian Shorten also completed his lay pastorate of the Riverstown group. In the past year, three new clergy were ordained to serve in the diocese: Revs. Joshua and Victoria Pringle and Rev. John Young. We are saddened to learn of the Rev Edward Lindsay's continued incapacity and bear him in our thoughts and prayers. On Advent Sunday Alan Williamson will be ordained deacon and will serve part-time in the Boyle group of parishes under the rector Canon Edward Yendell.

Currently, 6 of our parish groups are vacant and I commend those working behind the scenes to secure the services of committed clergy for our parishes. To ease the stress in the Fermanagh and Cavan borderland, Canon Edmund Smith, will move from Roscommon later this year to work alongside Archdeacon Hazel.

Second, I want to make some comments on finances and administration which make up the bulk of the Synod report. The backdrop to finances is the current cost of living crisis which all of us are feeling. To travel here today to take part in the Synod meant filling up with diesel which is now over two euro a litre and there is little sign of it coming down. Our parishes and our diocese are highly dependent on live giving. I want to acknowledge the generosity of those who contribute to the finances of their parishes, to keep the lights on and to resource the ministry and mission of the church. Jesus spoke much about money and urged his followers to be rich rather than mean towards God, and that includes giving to God's work. A huge amount of detailed work is done by Vestries and parish treasurers in raising assessments and paying for the upkeep of

largely historical heritage buildings. Likewise, diocesan finances as you can see in the Synod report are in good health, which reflects the generous outlook in the parishes. The outgoing Diocesan Council and their Finance and Glebes committees have done sterling work in this regard. This year we are going to elect a new Diocesan Council who will serve a three year term, rather than be elected each year. This is to provide continuity of personnel and not to lose people who have skill sets and expertise in finance and property. In all this financial, property and administrative work we are indebted to a small team of people who do most of the heavy lifting. To Sarah, our administrator, to Rita in property and to Ann in the office. Thank you. Our administrative hub is currently in the Royal School. We are thankful to the principal and board for providing temporary office space. Plans are well advanced to relocate the diocesan office in the gate lodge of the former See House at Kilmore Cross. Many of the records and materials that we kept over the years have been transferred to the Church of Ireland archives in the RCB Library in Dublin where they can be properly stored and made accessible for searches. We are also working on digitising the remaining materials to prevent clutter. Hopefully, the new office will be open in 2027 and will make good use of a heritage building which is semi derelict.

Thirdly, it is often said that the early years of a child's life is foundational. Our engagement with children reflects this principle. Each month the Scribe is packed with pictures and details of baptismal groups, Sunday schools, kid's clubs, school events and Confirmations. As a diocese we invest heavily in work among children and young people which is paying off. This past year has seen a renaissance in Sunday schools. Some parishes have restarted their Sunday schools after the hiatus of the Covid years. Messy church and muddy church are also making a comeback, alongside seasonal holiday Bible clubs. In our Secondary schools, small groups of young people meet each week in Christian Unions and Youth Alpha is regularly rolled out in Transition Year. The work of our chaplains: Patrick Bamber in SGS, Mark Smith in RSC and Tammy Scott in WHS is vital. This past year, for example, saw significant numbers of young people from our schools attending youth festivals such as Summer Madness and Move. Whether locally in parishes or nationally, these activities pass on the faith to each generation of children and that is foundational.

The work that goes on in schools under Church of Ireland patronage is also key. I am patron to 17 National Schools across the diocese and am involved in 3 others. Sadly, Drung Central NS closed its door for the last time in June of this year after 200 years of existence. In the past academic year, a survey was conducted nationally about patronage in the National Schools. Around 250 Church of Ireland schools were included in the survey. What were the headlines? Around 40% of parents completed the survey. Of those who completed it 40% preferred a change in patronage. The call for a change

was most notable in South County Dublin and some towns in the Dublin commuter belt. Whereas in most rural schools, small town Ireland and in disadvantaged areas, there was little demand for change. The picture in the Church of Ireland schools mirrored the national trends, although there was confusion in what was being asked about multi denominational schools. Most of the National Schools I am patron of are multi denominational in character. The student body consist of a variety of protestant denominations, other Christian traditions and other faiths. Our schools are inclusive, diverse and not class or racially based. They tend to be small schools that are welcoming and caring. They set high standards in terms of behaviour and learning. They give children the building blocks for life. They are run by local Boards of Management which are representative with staff, parents and parishes and are embedded in local communities. We in the Church of Ireland have been running schools in Ireland for at least two centuries and we have exported primary schools to the majority world in Africa, Asia and the Americas. I want to endorse the work done in our National Schools by principals, staff volunteers and on Boards of Management.

In the next decade there will be projected drop off in National School pupils due to demographic change. Some schools may be more vulnerable to falling enrolments. Parental choice is key in this regard. Parents tend to send their children to certain schools for a variety of reasons. As a community, I think we need to be proactive in promoting the value of our schools and to encourage our people to send their children to them because they will get a great start in life not only educationally but also spiritually. The same applies to our secondary schools. I have heard it said by some that these schools have a minority of Church of Ireland teenagers in their enrolment. One of the obvious reasons for this is that parents and indeed young people do not prioritize these schools in their choices. There needs to be a change in thinking if these schools are going to have a long- term future. Our three schools: RSC, SGS and WHS were in existence before the USA was formed. They deserve our support because they have demonstrated a commitment to education and Christian values over many centuries.

All our work with children and young people comes under the framework of Safeguarding, to protect the young, those who work with them and the witness of the church. As a church we acknowledge complacency and failings in the past in this area. The safeguarding team in the diocese is to be commended for their diligence and vigilance. Given the increased work load I am pleased that the diocese has appointed a new Safeguarding and Vetting Coordinator, Stephen Donohue who is with us today and will be introduced later. Jesus Christ put the highest value on children and the young. He set the bar in the Gospels, and we have no place settling for lower standards in this vital matter.

Lastly, the Church of Jesus Christ is a missional enterprise. It looks beyond itself and does not live for itself. I am very conscious of this outward stance in the diocese. Since we last met there have been significant initiatives. The Elphin archdeaconry comprising of parishes in Sligo and Roscommon came together in an outreach called.

They paved the way for next year the Ardagh archdeaconry based in Longford and South Leitrim is also breaking new ground in a Spring outreach. During the summer, Canon Christiaan and Karen Snell, lead a Mission team to Capetown in South Africa. Later this month, Faith Sithole, is heading off to Egypt as part of a CMSI team. Recentre our fresh expression of church in Sligo has relocated to Magee House beside the cathedral to be more present and active in the community. Lizzie Crone is leading the community there as part of the Church of Ireland Pioneer Ministry Initiative. A new Pioneer Ministry hub has been set up to think through and advocate for new initiatives to those who have little or no connection with the church. Rachel Cox, too, has been active in the field of agricultural chaplaincy, engaging with the farming sector which is so visible in our setting as a diocese. The church is often characterised as inward looking and absorbed by its own interests. We are no petty people, our outlook is outward and our reach is global. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves which is growing and reaching a world with the transforming Good News of Jesus Christ.

Finally, one of the most important influences on my life as a follower of Jesus Christ was John Stott, rector of All Souls church in London and a global Anglican church leader. One of the ministries that he started the Langham Partnership is with us in Synod today. Stott, used the kite illustration as a metaphor for true Christianity, flying high in faith but remaining firmly anchored to Scripture and the foundational Christian beliefs but able to engage freshly and dynamically with the modern world and changing times. I long for people and parishes to soar, to explore God's creation and character, buoyant in the Holy Spirit with vitality And at the same time deeply rooted in Christ, anchored in God's word to reach a world and people who have lost their way.

God the Holy Spirit, come in power and bring new life to the church; renew us in love and service, and enable us to be faithful to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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