



# ***‘Voices of Hope’***

Pastoral Letter from

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## Introduction

St Paul, writing to guide, strengthen and support the growing Christian community in Ephesus, encouraged them all to reflect together on the nature of the Church, its various ministries and gifts, and to creatively consider how every individual could play their essential, unique and important part to grow and build up the Body of Christ. He writes,

'Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.'

**(Eph. 4: 15-16)**

These prophetic words of St Paul take on added significance for us, the followers of Jesus within the Diocese of Down and Connor, as we continue our synodal journey of discernment to identify and meet the ever changing sacramental and pastoral needs of parishioners and society in our time.

In my earlier Pentecostal letter '*Be part of God's amazing dream*', I invited all of us to reflect on the new possibilities that the Spirit is calling us to in the Church today, both locally and universally, and encouraged your participation in the *Pathways to the Future* initiative which seeks to examine the mission, structures and priorities of the Diocese of Down and Connor for the years ahead.

In the weeks that follow, this *Pathways to the Future* initiative will come into new focus with the organisation of a series of parochial information and consultation sessions across the diocese and I would again encourage you all to take this opportunity to share your personal hopes and dreams for the local Church.



### **World Mission Month: 'Hearts on fire, feet on the move'**

Each October, however, is also designated by the Church as *World Mission Month*; an opportunity to reflect on our responsibility to act in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in need and to be Christ's missionaries in the world.

Reflecting upon the Story of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, Pope Francis appeals to all of us not only to address our local concerns but also to confront as missionary disciples the wider challenges within our world with 'Hearts on fire, feet on the move' (Lk 24:13-35).

In his 2023 message for World Mission Day, Pope Francis wisely reminds us that we are to be bearers of the Good News that the "Risen Lord remains close to his missionary disciples and walks beside them, particularly when they feel disorientated, discouraged, fearful of the mystery of iniquity that surrounds them and seeks to overwhelm them."<sup>1</sup> Voices of this hope-filled Truth need to be proclaimed to the whole world.

Called to be voices of hope in the world, it is important for each of us to hold in constant balance the evangelical mission of the Church locally and universally.

World Mission Month assists us therefore in recognising the truly 'Apostolic' and 'Catholic' or universal nature of the Body of Christ as each of us plays our role in service of a world at times in crisis – with its fears, its fragmentation, its violence and distress.

Our voices of hope need to resound not only in our own parishes and in our own diocese but across the world as the Lord hears and responds to the cries of all his children. (See Exodus. 3: 7-10, Psalm 61)

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<sup>1</sup> Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Mission Day 2023, par. 1.

## **'Speaking the truth in love...'**

In his Letter to the Romans, St Paul begins his guidance by encouraging the Church community to pursue the Truth with a sense of pastoral charity. There is no doubt that there are many challenges to be faced by the Church locally and globally and that this will necessitate change in order to meet the sacramental and pastoral needs of our time. It is into this context that St Paul affirms that there is a distinctly Christian manner to engage in missionary dialogue.

The Old Testament is marked by the many prophets that God sent as his messengers of hope and truth. Addressing and embracing the challenges of their time, these prophets spoke words of challenge and words of hope; words to disturb the comfortable and words to comfort the disturbed. These messengers of the Word of God were motivated to bring hope and communicate the reality of God's abiding presence with his people, especially in difficult times. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God affirmed:

'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' **(Jer. 31:33)**

As the 'Pathways to the Future' initiative progresses, there is no doubt that it will need to address and embrace the challenges facing our parishes. At the same time, the motivation is to bring hope and communicate the abiding reality that God continues to guide the Church in its mission of mercy to the world.

Confronting this reality will necessarily involve words to disturb the comfortable as we explore the restructuring of parishes, the development of new ministries and consider new ways to meet the increasing pastoral and sacramental needs. Change will be inevitable.

At the same time, it is also important to speak words that will bring comfort to the disturbed. The Church will continue to support the faith development of all and provide for the needs of parishioners in the abiding Truth that God is with his people.



St Paul reminds us that holding these two perspectives together is only possible when the truth is pursued in love. The distinctly Christian nature of missionary dialogue is that it is carried out with a sense of pastoral charity. Such Christian dialogue seeks first of all to hear the other respectfully before speaking ourselves. Missionary dialogue therefore seeks first of all to be an act of listening.

As each person shares their personal hopes and aspirations, it is important that we hear also their cares and concerns. Christian dialogue is marked by this listening to the other with pastoral charity. The Gospels recall often how this was a hallmark of the pastoral approach of Jesus, especially towards those who were marginalised and suffering. When we listen respectfully to others, motivated by pastoral charity, then we are truly in a position to raise our own voices of hope.



### **“...we will grow ...”**

St Paul continues in his guidance to the early Roman Christian community to identify the aim of this Christian dialogue in pursuit of the truth. The Church is an organic living community and therefore Christian dialogue seeks to create the environment in which that body will be nurtured and grow.

A mature Christian dialogue and discernment should be constructive rather than destructive. In writing to the Church in Ephesus, St Paul was conscious that there were some who sought opportunities to deconstruct the Christian community, espousing a message of disunity. In contrast, however, a mature Christian dialogue seeks to build upon the good work at the heart of the community, to be constructive and particularly to affirm all within the Body of Christ. In another passage, St Paul again sought to bring hope to the people of Corinth as he insisted “Let all things be done for building up.” (1 Cor. 14:26)

This principle of affirmation is tremendously important in any synodal process of discernment. Constructive engagement allows for mature growth, respectful of each voice and drawing upon the talents and gifts of all within that community. Everyone has a role to play in the Body of Christ.

**“...to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”**



As Pope Francis reminds us in his 2023 World Mission message, the central Truth of Christianity is that God is with us. It is worth reflecting further on this unchangeable Truth at the heart of Christianity. The Church is founded upon and integrally linked to the person of Christ.

Just as Christ is fully human and fully divine, the Church; the community of the faithful, shares in His humanity and divinity. The Church, the organic living community of faith, only has meaning when it seeks to enter more fully into the nature of Christ.

St Paul captures this Truth and reality by using the image of the Church as the Body of Christ. Just as a Body is made up of different parts, so too the Church has many members and each person is important in that Body.

This Truth and reality also affirms that the Church is not simply nor principally about institutional structures but all of us exercising our responsibility as members of the Body must primarily focus our attention on how the Church can continue to nurture and strengthen relationship with Christ.

**“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”**

St Paul reminds us that we find our common purpose and unity in the personhood of Christ. This was manifested in each of us in Baptism when, for the first time, we were welcomed into the Christian community, we became part of the Church and we were configured to the nature of Christ Himself. United in one baptism, sharing in the nature of Christ, each of us have our part to play within the Body.

This Body is held together by every supporting ligament. As we discern together new approaches to continue to meet the sacramental and pastoral needs of our time, it is important that each voice has an opportunity to speak. Each voice has a message of hope to bring because each voice reminds us of the role they play in the reality that is the Body of Christ. This network of relationships within the Church joins and holds together the faith community and is a manifestation of the Catholicity of the Church.

In recent years, Pope Francis has reinforced this universality and collaborative nature of the Church in all the diversity of its various ministries.

## **Conclusion**

This is an exciting time to be Church in Down and Connor and in the world. The world faces many challenges – poverty, climatic change and the threat of war. Now, as in Jesus' time, many people are harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36).

In the weeks and months ahead, I again encourage you all to engage in the Christian dialogue and conversations that will be organised by the *Pathways to the Future* as we seek together to listen to one another, to embrace the truth in love and to discern new ways to be ministers of mercy in our day. I also encourage you to pay attention to the Signs of our Times and the concerns of our world so that we can truly be missionary voices of hope to all.

The Church needs to hear your voice. The Church needs each person to speak the truth in love. We need to embrace the challenges and we need voices of hope. Share your dreams and aspirations, your cares and concerns. Let us embark on our diocesan *Pathway to the Future* with realism, joy and hope and may God bless us all on our journey together.



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