

**General Synod of the Church of Finland**  
**Speech of Greeting by the Right Reverend Dr Paul Colton, Bishop of Cork**  
**Monday, 6th November, 2017**

I thank you for your welcome, and also for affording me this opportunity to address the esteemed members of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.

When I visit you in the Church of Finland, I always feel welcome and enjoy the hospitality and dialogue. Our visit on this occasion, from the Diocese of Cork in the far south and south-west of the Church of Ireland, is at the invitation of Bishop Björn Vikström. We were delighted to welcome him and his staff to Cork in June last year. He, and they, made a great impression and our bonds of Porvoo friendship were strengthened.

My friend Dr Johan Dalman, Bishop of Strängnäs in Sweden (he and I first met in Järvenpää in 1992 as we worked in the Porvoo Agreement process together), says that '[t]here are many ways to tell the story of how it came to happen that four Anglican churches and six Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches came to fall in love with each and declare their intent to intermarry.'

My experience is one of those stories. More than feeling welcome, when I come here I feel a deep sense of indebtedness to, and enrichment by, this Church. It is arguable that I would not be here at all as an ordained person had it not been for the friendly invitation of a Finnish girl. In 1976 I arrived in Canada as a sixteen year old scholarship student at an international school - one of the United World Colleges. Those were days when 'far away from home' meant exactly that: no Whatsapp, iMessage or modern communication tools. Telephone was too expensive. On my first Sunday morning, as I walked from the dining room after breakfast, a Finnish girl from the year ahead of me, stopped me to chat, and then said 'Some of us are going to Church; would you like to come with us?' I accepted the invitation. It is the oldest and most reliable evangelistic strategy in the 'Good Book': talk to people and then invite them to 'come and see.'

I did 'go and see' that day and, in that little Anglican parish on Vancouver Island, my faith was nourished and deepened, and the seeds of vocation to ordained ministry were sown. Thank you Finland, and thank you Anna-Mari. I think she is here this morning, and I never properly said 'thank you' to her before now.

My first visit to Finland was twenty-five years ago. We flew in at night time in October. We worked hard in our conference room at Järvenpää. Four days later we drove to the airport, once more at night, and flew home in the darkness. 'What is Finland like?' my wife Susan asked me. 'I don't really know', I told her, 'we arrived and left in the dark and worked in the conference room all the time in between.' The 'work in-between' did lead to one journey of light. On Sunday, 11th October 1992 we ventured forth from Järvenpää in a bus to Porvoo. Snow began to fall thickly. I sat on the bus next to the wonderful Irja Askola, later to be your first woman bishop, who was at that time working for the Conference of European Churches (CEC) in Geneva. We spoke about CEC, as earlier that summer in

Prague, I had been elected to its Central Committee. In Porvoo that day all of us at conference, celebrated the Eucharist and gave that town's name to our agreement.

That Porvoo Common Statement, formally celebrated in 1996, has been a source of light, joy, cooperation and partnership. There are still many possibilities and opportunities to deepen it in the years ahead. I sat at the feet of your former Archbishop, John Vikström, in Westminster Abbey on 28th November 1996, when he preached at the Porvoo celebrations there. I worked on the Porvoo Contact Group with his brother Bishop Erik Vikström. Three years later, Bishop Erik Vikström, travelled to Dublin, to take part in my ordination as a Bishop. Finnish hands from your Finnish Church were used by God in that consecration. Since then I have been here a number of times in connection with Porvoo, to the Anglican Chaplaincy and back to Järvenpää for a meeting of the European Consortium for Church and State Research: law and gospel! I treasure all of these memories, links and the way they have enriched and transformed me.

So, here we are today, and it is a joy. We come to Turku today mindful of the terror attack of 18th August last. In this globalised society we are never far from one another and, as Christians, our prayers unite us as does God's challenge to us to be bridge-builders in the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us.

Yours is the largest Church in Finland. Ours is a small Church of approximately 375,400 members. In the Republic of Ireland, we are 126,414 members. That's a 2% decrease since the previous census. In our Diocese we bucked the trend and had a 7% increase. Finding everyone who claims to belong is the big challenge! In our last National Census in 2016 the number of people declaring that they have no religion rose by 73% and now constitutes 10.1% of the population.

Being a national majority church, as you are, is an immense responsibility; being a small church by comparison, albeit the largest minority Church, also brings national responsibilities on a demanding scale with limited resources. Last year we commemorated the start of the Revolution in Ireland in 1916 that led, ultimately in 2021 to our independence, but tragically also to Civil War. This year you have your Centenary of independence. Both our countries, with their similarly sized populations, have experienced famine and emigration. Today, from our respective peripheries of Europe, we in the west and you in the north-east, share the fact that much of our history has been shaped by larger neighbours.

Nonetheless, in both contexts our contemporary calling is the same:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

We Anglicans call these the “Five Marks of Mission.’ The basis of our relationship with other Christians is, as you know that reliable Nineteenth Century formulary which we call the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral: the scriptures, the creeds, the two sacraments ordained by Christ himself, and the historic episcopate locally adapted.

With our common agreement, our shared faith and fellowship, we journey together, and, in our time, share many concerns. I’ve already mentioned the global threat of terrorism. On our agenda we have debates about greater inclusion, sexuality and marriage equality, church finances, levels of participation (particularly of young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 years), as well as, national questions about the role of the Church in society. BREXIT poses very particular issues for us and places our divided island, and our border with Northern Ireland, centre stage once more. Peace in Northern Ireland is fragile. We need our partners in the European household to understand this very unique situation within Europe.

Finally, I am conscious that your esteemed Archbishop will retire soon after a distinguished period as Archbishop of Turku and Finland. As I bring greetings from the Church of Ireland in Cork, Cloyne and Ross to you all in this General Synod, I ask also that our good wishes be extended, through you to the Archbishop personally, along with, once more, our affection for, and gratitude to, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.

I have been asked to conclude by praying for you and your work as your day begins:

Go forth into the world in peace;  
be of good courage;  
hold fast that which is good;  
render to no one evil for evil;  
strengthen the fainthearted;  
support the weak;  
help the afflicted;  
honour everyone;  
love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;  
and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,  
be amongst you and remain with you always. Amen.