

A peace-making journey from Ireland to Scotland

David Chillingworth
talks to *Hattie Williams*
about his time as Primus
of the Scottish Episcopal
Church and his plans for
retirement

ENDINGS have a habit of being beginnings. This observation of the retiring Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Most Revd David Chillingworth, after the vote to allow same-sex marriage, during his final General Synod last week, spoke as much of his 41 years of ministry as the issue at hand.

As broadcasters flocked to record the decision, he remarked: "In the life of the Church, end-points are also often starting-points. . . The journey which we now begin must also be a journey of reconciliation."

Truth and reconciliation have been the bedrock of his ministry, Bishop Chillingworth said on Saturday, after the Synod ended, as he reflected on his retirement next Sunday. His 29 years as a Church of Ireland ordinand, parish priest, archdeacon, and dean, during the thick of the troubles in Northern Ireland, profoundly shaped his vocation. They formed the pillars of his conviction throughout his 12 years as a bishop, then a Primate, of the small Anglican province of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

It is fitting, then, that he should spend his last few days as Primus attempting to heal some of the wounds inflicted by the same-sex vote.

"I will be meeting with clerics who are really anxious and unhappy, trying to say that there is space, your view is entirely legitimate, and that because of the conscience clause, nobody is going to force you to do anything you don't want to do. It is very sensitive, and quite difficult, but that is the next stage."

GAFCON's decision to announce a new missionary bishop for Scotland, in Edinburgh, immediately after the vote, was "ill-mannered" but inconsequential, Bishop Chillingworth said, because the brand of Evangelical conservatism which it represented did not marry with that of his Church.

"We certainly don't threaten them; and I don't see why they should come and appear to attempt to pressurise us in this way. It is very difficult to respond to that. I do understand that our decision has given them a focus and a pretext, and, while they are deeply concerned about us, I suspect that their real concern will be south of the border."

Referring to the response from elsewhere in the Anglican Communion, he said "I found the last Primates' Meeting very difficult: not because of the smallness of our Church, but because of the underlying understanding of how the Communion functions.

"We are a communion of relationship. We live by unity and diversity; we do not live on the basis that there is a majority view, and that those who do not subscribe to it are somehow somewhere else; nor do we elevate Lambeth Conference Resolutions to policies to which we are expected to conform. . . For us, that is serious, because the risk is the suggestion that what we have done now puts us beyond the limits of acceptable diversity."

BISHOP CHILLINGWORTH's main regret from his ministry in Scotland, however, lies closer to home: he refers to his inability, while he was Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld & Dunblane, to carry clergy with him during a period of change in the Church.

"As with many people from many walks of life — doctors, teachers, people who work in banks — they [some of his clergy] thought that they were joining up to do one kind of job, and found that it had changed in some way, and found that change difficult. I was deeply saddened by that."

It resulted in a bout of "clergy unhappiness, long-term sickness, and relationship breakdown" in his diocese. "As a bishop, you want to see clergy having happy and fulfilling ministries. I wasn't altogether sure why there was a problem, and that really disturbed me. I did my very best, but wasn't able to solve it, not for everybody."

The hurt felt after the Columba Declaration was, he says, in a "different category", and he lets slip a hint of bitterness in an otherwise careful and upbeat interview.

"The way in which it came about and was launched was a mistake. I regarded it as inappropriate for the Church of England to form that kind of agreement in Scotland, without proper consultation with us.

"The Archbishop of Canterbury apologised warmly and wholesomely for that; so that's over. We have worked really hard to redeem that situation, meaning to pull good out of it, and that is there."

Any tension with the Church of Scotland has been eased, however, by the Churches' mutual understanding of same-sex marriage: the General Assembly of the Kirk voted last year to allow gay clerics to marry their partners in the Church.

"Our relationship with the Church of Scotland is now a warm one of mutual regard," he says. "We have ended up approaching the same issues in the same way at the same time. And we now have a Common Calling group, which is looking at how we can support each other in the huge spaces of the Highlands."

IDENTITY is central to any faith community, Bishop Chillingworth says, and, while the Scottish Episcopal Church has always had a "distinctive character" — described by one colleague as "un-flamboyant ministry" — this is being reshaped by its young members, and a changing political landscape.

As well as youth, the Church has also enjoyed a surge in ordinands, resulting in a growth in confidence. "I coined the phrase 'radical independent mindedness' because I never use the word 'liberal', which is a very dangerous word. We are moving beyond that."

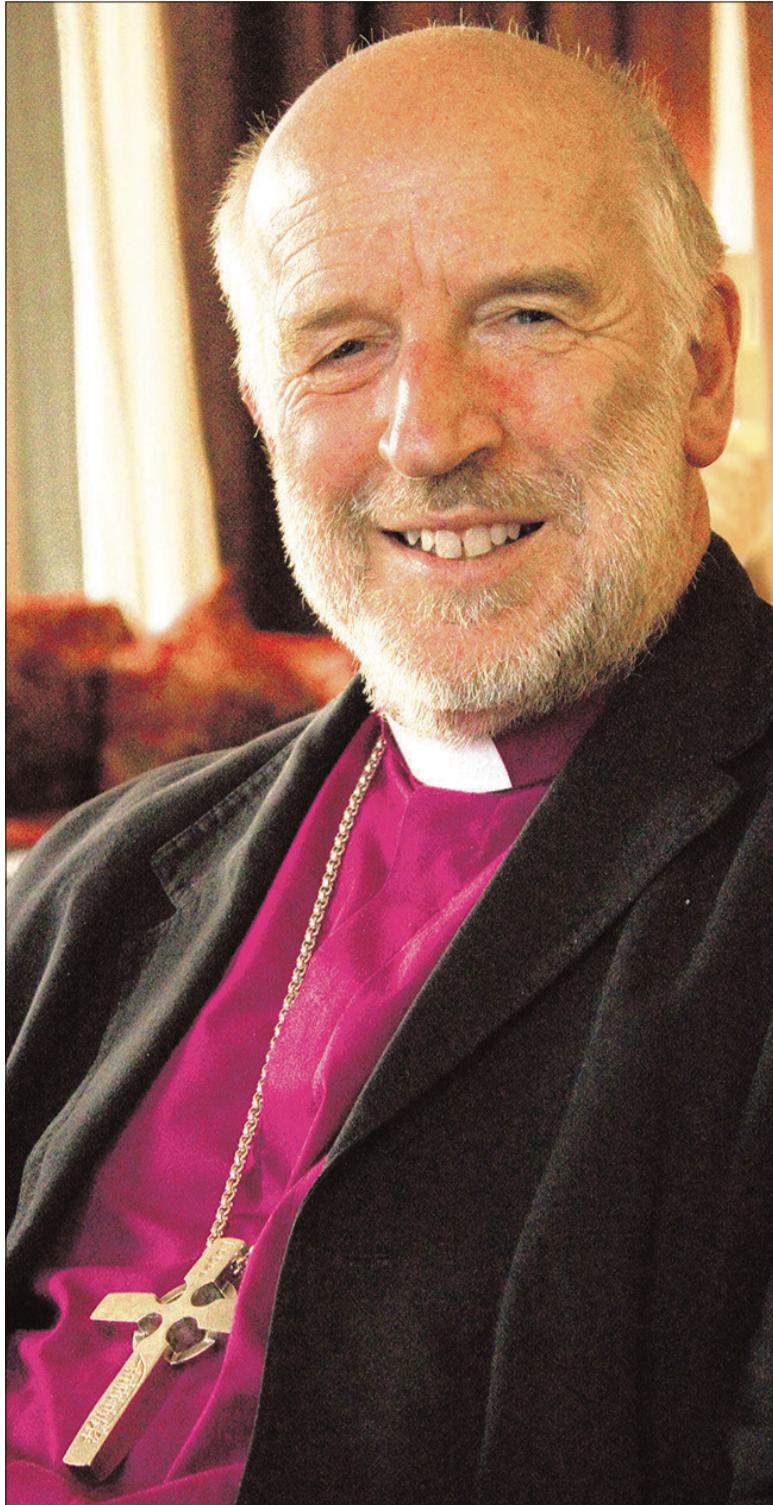
New leadership will give "fresh energy" to the Church on social issues, he says, such as climate change, finance, and equality. "I take huge comfort from that. We clearly see ourselves — in terms of the same-sex vote — as standard-bearers for equality on all fronts."

Scottish independence has long been a key issue for the Church, although the recent General Election, with the loss of 19 SNP seats, may have taken it off the agenda.

"We are commonly known as the English Church here, and we fight very hard against that label, but it might be seen as implying a particular stance on independence. If the ground is changing, that is a positive thing for us."

The question of independence, he

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The decision to leave Ireland was, in part, forced on him, he says. "Ireland is still mired in division, of course, but fortunately, thank God, people are not dying. There is some mechanism, however, which means that the peacemakers and reconcilers leave, or are thrown out, and I and many of the people that I worked with ended up outside of Ireland."

On his surprise election as a bishop, at St Ninian's Cathedral, Perth, in 2005, his wife, Alison, challenged him: "She said to me: 'So what about your life vocation to reconciliation in Ireland, then?'" To which I said, 'I have fulfilled that to the very limits of my abilities. I regard myself as extraordinarily fortunate to have ended up here.'"

He acknowledges his reputation for speaking candidly. "I have always believed that truth lies at the heart of reconciliation, and I have always tried to speak the truth, and speak it gently, but clearly. Sometimes, people are afraid to do that, because they are not quite sure how to do it in a way that doesn't give offence. I spend a lot of time trying to teach clergy appropriate assertiveness."

Overall, he is proud of his ministry in Scotland. "I arrived with great uncertainty, and some apprehension, but that all dissolved away. It has just been wonderful, and we have had opportunities nationally and internationally that I would never imagine I would have done."

The Church has enjoyed a period of stability, although this is now ending, he admits. There are currently three vacant sees, and a degree of political and cultural uncertainty.

But, he says, "we have used the time of stability we have had — three or four years — really well. . . I am more concerned about making sure that we have enough people to fill the gaps; it is not a ministry for everyone."

HIS identification with Scotland is "very strong", and, while he says that he has "moved around too much, and experienced too much" to say where he belongs, he is staying in the country in his retirement, where his three children, and four young grandchildren, reside.

Listening to his grandchildren grow up with Scottish accents is "odd" none the less, he says, and, as one of three children, separated by five years, with no cousins and grandparents far away, he is new to the "rich" experience of extended family.

His children are doctors and a physiotherapist: all vocations, he says, although he has high hopes for his eldest grandchild, Eve, who is five. "I think that Eve may well be an archdeacon," he laughs.

Spending more time with his family is high on his priorities. He is also halfway through writing a book — unsurprisingly, it is about his clergy ancestors and Irish identity.

He is only too aware of the challenge of laying down the cloth. "Clergy don't retire easily, because role and identity become confused. I have spoken really sternly to myself; and now I am going to discover who I am without the office."

"I think that people in my position are allowed to ask themselves whether they have made a difference; and I take a deep breath, and say, yes, I did. I have had two extraordinary experiences of ministry — either would have been enough for anybody. But everything comes to an end, and I have other things I want to begin."

A longer version of this interview appears on www.churchtimes.co.uk.

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