

The Archbishop delivered a speech in today's session of General Synod, saying farewell to the Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler, who is retiring from his role.



If there is a verse from scripture that comes to mind when I think of Paul Butler's ministry as a disciple of Jesus, a priest and a bishop then it is Mark 10. 14; Jesus said "Let the children come to me, do not stop them."

Paul has done many remarkable things in his long, fruitful and effective ministry but most of all and above everything else he has been someone who has worked for children and families, longing to serve them; because serving them is the right thing to do, but also knowing that the greatest gift they can receive is the knowledge of the love God has for them in Jesus Christ. Hence, after ordination to the diaconate in 1983, Paul served his curacy in Wandsworth, but then took up a role with Scripture Union helping churches in inner London develop outreach work with children and families. He went on to be responsible for their holidays and beach missions before returning to parish ministry in Walthamstow in the lovely diocese of Chelmsford, a parish I later came to know well. Not least because the impact of his ministry was still being felt.

Moreover, when episcopal ministry came calling, as Bishop of Southampton in the Diocese of Winchester then as diocesan Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham and for the past ten years as Bishop of Durham, Paul has been committed to children's flourishing and well-being. This was the reason that in 2010 Paul agreed to be Lead Bishop for Safeguarding. We all know what a hard and shameful journey we have been on when it comes to making the church a safe place and listening to the voice of victims and survivors. Again, in this Synod we have been reminded of our failings. This is a tough brief, but Paul took on this work at a time when the Church of England only had a part time national safeguarding advisor. He was instrumental in alerting us to the urgency of professionalising and enhancing safeguarding practice across the whole Church of England. Much of the structure we now see in our diocese– whether that's our Diocesan Safeguarding Officers or various national safeguarding policies– stem from Paul's doggedness to see these improvements embedded in our Church. Of course, we have further work to do. But Paul we are building on your legacy, and we thank you for stepping into the breach at some personal cost to make the church a safer place for everyone. And thank you for bringing the voices of victims and survivors into this conversation.

For the past five years Paul has chaired the National Society and been the Lead Bishop for Ministry with Children and Young People. He has brought to this role the experience of a lifetime, and that experience and expertise has not only shaped policy but won huge respect in government.

With the same conviction and clarity Paul has been a champion of children caught in poverty. He has been a steadfast opponent to the two-child limit to Universal Credit – a policy that receives little attention but continues to do much harm. He has been at the forefront of the legislative and other work on asylum and immigration issues, in Parliament and out. However, what has been most striking is the way Paul holds relationships across the houses and parties, and the significant pastoral role he has held for many in the House of Lords. Paul, you have often said some very tough and direct things to Secretary of States and ministers, but you are always gracious, always positive, always, first and foremost, a minister of the gospel who longs to serve children, to bring them to Jesus, and remove the barriers that get in the way.

It is no coincidence that you co-led the Archbishops' Families and Household Commission and the positive reception it has received from those outside the church and indeed from our debate here on Sunday and Monday is due in a large part to your commitment and determination on these areas. It is this legacy we intend to build on.

I also know that in your diocesan farewell a few weeks ago, one of the tributes that moved you the most was a video which had been collated from various primary and secondary school children across the Diocese of Durham. They thanked you for listening, engaging, and advocating on their behalf. We do too.

And I haven't mentioned all the other things diocesan bishops do: the long train journeys to and from London; the exhausting schedule of meetings; the pastoral care of clergy; and the strategic leadership of the diocese. But I will say this, the clergy you served will never have doubted that you loved them.

Nor have I mentioned Paul's deep love for and commitment to Africa, and especially Rwanda and Burundi.

And through all this, alongside you in marriage and in ministry, is Rosemary. In Rosemary, you have had someone who loved you and cared for you and who herself demonstrates the fruits of a life rooted in Christ. In particular, I know that Diocesan colleagues fondly remember the Christmas Hampers that you and Rosemary sent to all your clergy and lay diocesan staff during Covid. Rosemary, for your care, graciousness and godliness, we thank you too.

Paul, as you know, when you were ordained priest in Southwark Cathedral 40 years ago this year, I was also in the building, being ordained Deacon, one year behind you. Over the years our paths have often crossed, particularly the past 20 years of Episcopal ministry.

I have learned so much from you: from your faithfulness to the gospel, from the way in which you represent the gospel, both in the Diocese of Durham, in the House of Lords and in the lives of all the many people you encounter, whose own lives have been changed because of your love for Jesus Christ.

I understand that your call to ordained ministry came just four days after your call to follow Christ. What a journey it has been. And journey, or I should say pilgrimage, is another big feature of your ministry. You have walked all over the diocese of Durham – and Nottinghamshire before it – and met many, many people, shared the gospel and spoke to their hearts. Last October I had the joyful privilege of being alongside you for what would have been one of the last of these pilgrimage walks.

The ordinal says bishops should know their people and be known by them. For me, the greatest tribute I can offer as you lay down this bit of ministry, and begin a new chapter, is that the people you serve have known you, and you have known them. They have seen Christ in you, and you have sought to reveal Christ in them, particularly and especially the children.

On behalf of many people across the Church of England and beyond whose lives have been a part of the journey of your ministry - we thank you.

And as God invites you around the next turn in the road, may you and Rosemary be absolutely assured of the love and the gratitude and prayers of the Church you have served so well.

We wish you God's richest blessing. You have helped make the Church a better, safer place for children and families. We promise to build on this legacy as we make growing younger and more diverse our priority and as we seek to be a simpler, humbler and bolder church. Indeed, Synod, I don't believe growing younger would even be part of the Church of England's vision and strategy were it not for the joyful, costly and persistent witness and of this godly bishop.

And finally, when bishops of Durham sign their names, they use the Latin title of Dunelm. This can cause confusion; even the security at Parliament have been known to ask why the Bishop of Durham appears to be sponsoring affordable homeware and soft furnishings.

But we know why. Paul, your whole ministry has been to help people feel at home in the Church of Jesus Christ. Thank you.

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