

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS  
DIOCESAN SYNOD  
15 JUNE 2019

**Living God's Love: Past, Present and Future**

I am going to use this Presidential Address to reflect on the journey that we have been on together as a diocesan family over the past decade. Then I want to make some suggestions about how we might discern God's call for the third five-year phase of *Living God's Love*.

That might sound a rather sterile sort of management exercise but looking backwards and looking forward are based on the rhythm of our life as Christians. Our central act of worship – Holy Communion – directs our focus back to the death and resurrection of Christ, in whom our salvation is rooted. We give thanks for all that has been. Then, in the present moment, we break bread and share wine, looking forward in hope-filled expectation for all that is to come. As St Paul put it 'For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Corinthians 11. 26).

Due to the size and complexity of this diocese I am not going to be able to mention every single thing that we've done over the past decade, so please excuse me if I omit something which is important to you. However, what I hope to do is to describe the broad initiatives that we have taken and are working on.

**Looking back**

I arrived here in September 2009 to find a diocese which was well run, in good heart, and with reasonable finances. The Archbishop of Canterbury commissioned me to work with my colleagues to give the diocese a fresh sense of direction and, in particular, to raise its levels of confidence and to encourage us to contribute more to the national church.

In my early months we held a series of meetings of the Bishop's Council and the Diocesan Synod, which led to the launch of *Living God's Love* in St Albans Cathedral on 15 January 2011.

The title of our diocesan vision reminds us what is at the very heart of our calling as a diocese: *Living God's Love*. The diocese of St Albans comprises 407 churches, 136 church schools, and about 130 chaplaincies – all of which are

called to live out God's love in their local context. We broke that down into three areas:

- Going deeper into God
- Transforming communities
- Making new disciples

We identified four values, which we bedded into our *Living God's Love* prayer: generosity, joy, imagination and courage. We wanted these values to imbue everything that we do as a diocesan family.

So that's one description of who we are as the Diocese of St Albans.

However, it is equally true to say that we are a medium sized business with considerable assets, a large number of lay and ordained staff who are subject to various pieces of law and who will be audited by tax officials, safeguarding teams and the Charity Commission. And that's why, as well as being a Christian family, we have to run our affairs in a professional manner.

Therefore we need to hold these two things in tension: being the family of God across Herts and Beds, rooted in the Christian faith and in our diocesan vision; at the same time we have to run a tight ship.

Back in 2010 we spent time thinking about how we would deliver the three themes of *Living God's Love*. Trevor Jones, the then Archdeacon of Hertford, chaired a working group which came up with a customised version of Mission Action Planning. The idea was to ask every one of our churches, schools and chaplaincies

- to reflect prayerfully on the context in which they are set;
- to identify the resources and opportunities that they have (such as church schools, facilities, buildings, congregation and so on);
- and to discern a small number of SMART goals, which would lead to spiritual and numerical growth.

There were a number of important corollaries:

1. We stressed that everything depended on the local church offering good worship, being actively involved in its local community, and making new disciples. To that end we said that we, as bishops and archdeacons, would prioritise our energies into resourcing, encouraging and strengthening the work at grassroots.
2. We said we would resist top down initiatives from 'the centre'. It is up to the local churches, schools and chaplaincies to determine *how* they were going to deliver the three themes. I want to say one more thing about

this because we've not been as effective in communicating this change as we should have been. In the past it was possible to employ officers in the Diocesan offices to run all sorts of central initiatives, such as building affordable housing on glebe land; HIV/Aids projects; climate change and environment groups; industrial mission and so on – as if we were sort of a spiritual mirror image of the local authority. When I arrived we had over twenty such committees. That proved very costly and pretty difficult to sustain. We have made a fundamental change in our approach. We now ask our parishes, our schools and our chaplaincies to discern the priorities through their MAP and deliver them locally. It's difficult to assess the impact of this, but overall it looks as if we have increased the total level of social involvement with street pastors, food banks, debt advice centres and addiction charities, whilst still providing most of the volunteers and much of the finance for homelessness projects across the two counties.

3. Thirdly, we asked every board and committee to re-examine themselves and their work and to ensure they were aligning it with *Living God's Love*.
4. Fourthly, we undertook a major review of ministry and vocations. We gave various scenarios to the Diocesan Synod, either to cut back or to maintain levels of staffing, and we made a bold decision to maintain the level of stipendiary posts, whilst giving ourselves freedom to decide where those posts should be deployed. We decided to try to increase the numbers of self-supporting ministers and Readers. As part of our listening to grassroots, we introduced the Lay Leaders of Worship scheme.

### **Living God's Love 2020**

In early 2015 we decided that we needed to review the progress of the first five years of *Living God's Love* and refresh it for the second five years. We seconded Kathryn Alford from the Ministry of Defence who undertook a process of listening to grassroots voices and experiences.

The responses that she received were positive, reporting a great deal of work, especially under the banner of 'transforming communities' but acknowledging that the theme which was proving the most difficult was 'making new disciples'.

However, it also became clear that the MAP process was flagging: many parishes had produced a MAP but done little since; others were trying to do too many extra things and were therefore overwhelmed. We spent time working on Kathryn's report and produced the following statement:

Across our diocese we want to:

1. *Go deeper into God:*
  - *Improve the quality of our worship*
  - *Help individuals grow in their personal faith and calling*
  - *Encourage pilgrimage and times away that change lives*
2. *Make new disciples of Jesus Christ:*
  - *Grow the faith of children and young people*
  - *Offer courses for enquirers*
  - *Reach out in hospitality to those unconnected to church*
  - *Create fresh expressions and pioneer ministries*
3. *Transform communities by the power of the Spirit:*
  - *Engage in social action that addresses local needs*
  - *Confront injustice*
  - *Protect the vulnerable and the environment.*

*We want to support these priorities through Mission Action Plans that set objectives and guide activities that are prayed for, up to date and regularly reviewed.*

This became the central focus of our work for the second phase and in 2016 we launched this under the expanded title of *Living God's Love 2020*.

One of the big issues we identified was how to take *Living God's Love 2020* forward.

1. We were clear that the ten points which were identified in the consultation for *Living God's Love 2020* were too many and that there was a danger that we wouldn't achieve any of them. Whilst they were all important themes, we encouraged people to work on just three of them:
  - Improving the quality of our worship
  - Growing work with children and young people
  - Reaching new people in new ways
2. We asked the Rural Deans and Deanery Lay Chairs to take a greater lead. This has been on the agendas at the regular meetings and the two residential meetings for Rural Deans and Lay Chairs. We have given the deaneries a small increase in funding to help them. In particular, we have supported each deanery in the development of a Deanery MAP.
3. Thirdly, we decided to undertake some modest restructuring and we brought together the Board of Ministry with the Board of Mission to ensure that we had better integration and delivery.

4. Refocus the efforts of some of our sector ministers and appoint a team of Parish Development Officers to undertake long-term embedding work with parishes. This meant redeploying some of our central sector ministry to focus specifically on the parishes. The responsibility of the new team of Parish Growth Officers, led by the Revd Kate Peacock, is to give extra help and support to parishes in their Mission Action Planning, and also to join up various pieces of work. In particular, to help parishes focus on just one or two achievable things and also to link it to vocations and stewardship.

### **Reaching New People**

We have put the vast majority of our energies and resources into rebooting and encouraging traditional forms of church. However, it is also clear that there are large sections of society which are not being touched by traditional church and we have to find new ways to engage with those communities.

Let me give you some salutary statistics:

- 70% of young people in Britain today identify as 'non-religious'.
- Two-thirds of young people in Britain never pray.
- 76% of practising Anglicans say they came to faith by the age of 21, the vast majority as children under the age of 11.
- A 15 year old is five times less likely to be a church attendee than an 80 year old.
- The majority of parishes in this diocese report single figures of those under 16 attending church, and many of them report none at all.
- 90% of Anglican parents think it important to pass on their faith to their children, but only 29% see it as an actual responsibility.
- 60% of Anglican parents have never prayed with their children.

In order to respond to these challenges, in 2017 we applied for money from the Church Commissioners to enable us to launch a project encouraging fresh expressions of church.

This initiative is not to replace traditional church but to complement it. Already many of our churches are running café-style worship, Messy Church and so on. We want to build on this and, carefully monitoring the results, see how we can take it forward.

Some officers were appointed to work with Canon Tim Lomax, our Director of Mission. Since then there have been a number of training events, parish visits and a good number of people have been trained on the Mission Shaped Ministry courses.

## **Church schools**

Due to pressures on time, I can only make a few comments about our church schools. This has been a time of rapid change with the inauguration of our first Multi-Academy Trust. At grassroots, a great deal of work has been done to integrate our schools both with their local parish and with the Diocesan Board of Education. The opportunity to provide 'distinctively Christian education' is one that is being grasped.

## **Post *Living God's Love 2020***

And so to the future. We are going to have to face some ongoing financial challenges and in the next couple of years we will revisit the question as to whether we can maintain the current level of stipendiary posts.

We also need to discern the priorities for the third phase of *Living God's Love*. To do this we want to launch a **Big Conversation** involving as many people as possible across all our parishes, schools and chaplaincies. We want to think together about the future under the banner of 'growing younger'. How can we pass the faith onto the next generation? Later in our agenda we are going to have the first bite at this 'Big Conversation'. Then, over the coming fifteen months, we are going to invite as many people as possible, but particularly every PCC, to engage in a thoughtful, prayerful conversation of how we can grow younger as a diocese. We will then draw together all the fruits of those conversations and launch phase three of *Living God's Love* in early 2021.

I hope that you will all help us with this process but particularly to make this a central part of your prayers over the coming months.

+Alan St Albans

11.6.2019