

Presidential Address 16 June 2012

Today's Diocesan Synod meeting takes place against the backdrop of celebration, anxiety and change. The celebrations focus around the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, the Olympics and the Paralympics. As you know, the Olympic torch will be going round the diocese. On Saturday 7th July it will pass through **Waltham Cross, Hertford, Ware and Bishop's Stortford**. On Sunday 8th July we will see it in **Bedford, Cotton End, Letchworth Garden City, Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City, Hatfield, St Albans, Hemel Hempstead** and finishing that evening with a celebration in **Luton**. The following day, Monday 9th July, it will go from **Luton to Dunstable**. Many people here in the diocese will be involved in various aspects of the Olympics, rather more I suspect in the organisation side rather than competing, but nevertheless both Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire will be affected in many ways.

However, a second aspect of this summer is the deep anxiety and uncertainty about our economy and the economies of Western Europe. We will all know of people who have lost their jobs; we are aware that even in the wealthier communities there are more empty shops in our high streets; unemployment, especially among the young, is at a frighteningly high level; many of the elderly have found that their pensions have not risen at the rate that they had hoped. The temptation is for us to pull up the drawbridge and retreat into our huddles to protect ourselves against the chill winds of recession. There is even a danger that we might do that corporately as a church.

The third bit of the backdrop is that this is the last meeting of the present Diocesan Synod. Elections are taking place and the next meeting in October will be a new synod. Some of you will have decided to hang up your lever-arch files and make a graceful retreat; others will be coming back for a further term. Thanks to all of you, especially those of you who are retiring from synod. It's also a good time to thank the staff from Holywell Lodge for all the hard work that they have put in organising these synod meetings during the triennium.

Over the past three years we have done a great deal of work in this synod and it is, I think, worth pausing and reminding ourselves of some of the main things that we have achieved. We have had presentations and debates on:

- The ministry of Readers
- Women in the Episcopate,
- The General Election
- Treading Lightly on God's World
- ReachOut Plus
- The Eastern Regional Ministerial Training Course
- Vocations
- Links with our companion dioceses in the West Indies
- The Anglican Communion Covenant
- The Olympics and the Paralympics
- Getting the Church to Work: Faith, Work and Economic Life
- Faith and the Financial Crisis.

You will also remember those other highlights, etched into my memory. The debate on the Ecclesiastical Offices (Terms of Service) Measure 2009 and Revision of Rules for Deanery Synods.

We have actually done a lot of work together. And then there is the work we have done on our diocesan vision. Throughout the whole triennium the Bishop's Staff Meeting, the Bishop's Council and you, members of the Diocesan Synod, have worked on our new diocesan vision, *Living God's Love*. You as a synod helped shape it – indeed you chose the name. It was launched eighteen months ago in January 2011.

A working party, chaired by the Archdeacon of Hertford, reviewed a range of options as to the best way to deliver our vision and they recommended we adopt Mission Action Planning. The synod debated this and made a number of constructive suggestions which, along with some of the observations of the working party, means that we have shaped it to suit our particular needs. That process is still going on. The majority of parishes have now produced their Mission Action Plan, others are still finalising them; a few parishes, for example, where there is a vacancy, have yet to undertake the work. Those Mission Action Plans are being shared, as we seek to learn from one another.

We are now in the next phase of delivering that vision and today we are going to take a look at the fruits of some work that has been going on for the past eighteen months in the Bishop's Staff Meeting and in consultation with Boards and Committees. This is our ministry strategy. You are going to have a chance to debate this later this morning, but let me set out before you one or two of the underlying principles.

You will know that our hope is that we can stem the cuts in stipendiary posts and stabilise our staffing in the diocese. We believe this is an integral part of *Living God's Love*. This should mean that we have to spend less time in meetings, working out how to make cuts in posts, so we can use the time and energy to look outwards. I hope it will remove the sense that we are having to impose ever larger work loads on hard-pressed laity and clergy.

I need to stress that there will still be some further pastoral reorganisation. For example, there are some parishes where we have known for many years that there will need to be a change of staffing when the present incumbent retires. We also have new housing areas where we will need to deploy staff for church planting. So please do not go back to your parishes saying that there is never going to be any more changes in levels of staffing.

Holding our present level of staffing will also only be achieved if we can rise to three challenges:

1. We will have to stem the decline in the numbers of those who worship in our churches. The situation is complex. There is a small number of churches which continue to see significant declines in their congregations. At the other end of the spectrum there is a group of churches which are seeing steadily growing congregations. However, the biggest group is in the middle, where numbers are holding or declining very slowly. I ask you to pray daily for the growth of God's church in this diocese and to share good practice with each other as we learn what leads to growth.
2. We need to ensure a good supply of suitable candidates for the ordained ministry. Praise God, we have seen an increase in the numbers of those offering themselves for the ordained ministry. This is also a big challenge for we are going to have to provide curacies, which will cost more money.
3. That leads onto the third challenge, which is the financial one. We give thanks to God that despite all the doom and gloom in our country and in the world, our churches are responding positively. In the year that we last have complete records for the combined amount that the churches of this diocese gave away to charity was £2.08m and last year's Bishop's Harvest Appeal raised almost £76,000. With regard to the parish share, we are only just a fraction ahead of last year (at the end of last month

we had collected 0.33% of the parish share than at the same time in the previous year). Thank you all for the hard work and for your generosity. I know that it has involved sacrifice by many people. Please also communicate with people in your parish about the difference that this is making.

Today's debate on our ministry strategy is, of course, much greater than simply the ordained stipendiary ministry. It is about Self Supporting Ministers and it is about our Readers (incidentally 19 new Readers were licensed earlier this month). In the next couple of years the synod will also be looking at the role, the ministry and the mission of lay people both in the Church and in the world, drawing on some of the work that Jeanette Gosney and others are working on.

We, like everyone in our nation, are facing choices. We can pull back in fear and put our heads in the sand. Or we can see the present opportunities for celebration and the chill winds of the financial crisis as God's opportunity. Are we up for it? I pray that we are and I believe that we are.

So as we look back over the past three years, we give thanks to God for all that has been done in our diocese. We seize the opportunities this year as we celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's Jubilee and engage with the Olympics and Paralympics. We pray for God the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us as we seek to *Live God's Love*.

+Alan St Albans Diocese June 2012