

Bishop's Charge
137TH Session of Synod
The Hamilton Convention Centre
November 18, 2011

It is my pleasure and privilege to welcome you to this 137th Session of the Synod of the Diocese of Niagara and my joy to invite you to participate fully in the work of this important gathering over the course of the next two days.

As we come together to the Hamilton Convention Centre, I and many others across the diocese are feeling a new sense of confidence. Something is beginning to take hold and emerge that is very exciting. We continue to discern God's will for our work together and in every region of the diocese. We are creating spaces to listen to each other and to open ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Something is shifting, a new day is dawning and I hope that this Synod will give us an opportunity to celebrate and to give thanks to God for the blessings we have experienced in our work over the past twelve months and the gifts we have in each other.

As you read through the Synod Journal, you will see that so much has been accomplished. We have ushered in a new level of financial stability with a firm commitment to continue to work toward a solid fiscal foundation to take us into the future. What is particularly remarkable about this is that, at the same time, we have increased our capacity to offer new staffing support for youth work, vision advocacy and justice making. We have also met with a number of our partners in ministry and mission whose work has been affected by decreases in last year's budget and we are finding new and creative ways to strengthen this work at both the parish and diocesan levels. The Hands across Niagara initiative, if it is well supported by all of us, will increase dramatically our ability to do this and I invite every person in the Diocese of Niagara to join Susan and me in making a monthly commitment or a generous once a year offering. In previous years, we witnessed a great deal of passion and concern for the work of outreach, on the floor of Synod. Let's harness that passion through the Hands across Niagara program which will allow parishes to create the local partnerships that will change lives and change the world. I want to thank Archdeacon Michael Thompson for the outstanding leadership he has offered in bringing this wonderful project to us and we wish him every blessing as he takes up his new duties with the National Church.

I provided a full report, at the pre-synod meetings, on my trip to Africa in February, as I continue the work of building and strengthening our relationships throughout our world-wide Anglican communion.

Let me just say, however, once again that Niagara's voice continues to be heard boldly around the world, in our National Church gatherings and committees, in town and city council chambers, in the offices of MPs, MPPs and Cabinet Ministers. We have been there at Go Stations, on street corners, at Poverty Round Tables, community events and market places, to speak words of truth and reconciliation wherever they are required. We are learning what it means to be a "prophetic" Church in this generation. For me this involves three things: speaking truth to power, discerning and articulating a vision for the future and proclaiming hope and good news to a troubled and broken world. For years now some of the most effective prophets in our midst have been our young people and I am pleased to see that this year at Youth Synod they have made a renewed commitment to our work and worship at the local parish level.

Again this year it has been my privilege to work with my colleagues at Cathedral Place who have all served the people of Niagara with commitment and dedication that is second to none. Every member of the Synod Office team has worked so hard in the wake of intense cost-cutting measures to bring to the people of Niagara a high level of service and support. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the twenty-five years of gifted and faithful service that Alison D'Atri has given to the people of the Diocese of Niagara. Alison, your work has been an incredible witness and example of the pursuit of excellence in ministry and I want to thank you once again for the many ways you inspire us and give of yourself so richly, in the course of your duties. I would also like to acknowledge Canon Marni Nancekivell for the work she has engaged in, leading up to this her first Synod as our Secretary of Synod, and I want to express our gratitude to Karen Nowicki who is also so intimately involved with the production of all of the materials and in the making of the arrangements that allow our Synod to take place. Our Chancellor, Rob Welch, has again this year been a tower of strength for me personally and his advice leading up to Synod and on so many other occasions has been a gift and a blessing to us all. Bringing us together for these meetings is a mammoth job and I want to offer a sincere word of thanks to all of the Synod staff, the planning committee, and to our team on the ground today, for all their many efforts.

You will see in the Synod Journal reports that the work of keeping our Diocesan Vision front and centre is alive and well in the work of the Vision Petal Leadership Groups and we will hear more today about how we have strengthened this work in the past few months. Today we will be celebrating and giving thanks for the many ways that we have focused upon and cultivated a generous culture of stewardship in Niagara. The report and the stories you will hear in these proceedings are a real testament to the outstanding leadership that Jim Newman has given to the diocese and to the vast majority of our parishes, as our Stewardship Consultant.

Jim leaves this position at the end of the year and, on behalf of this Synod, I want to congratulate him and offer our sincere thanks for a job very well done!

Tomorrow we will turn our attention to the work of Prophetic Social Justice Making that will be a particular area of focus for us in the coming year. My remarks now turn to this aspect of our ministry as a diocese and my own reflections on what will be required of us in 2012.

The gospel passage that was read in our gathering worship this morning is Luke's account of Jesus first call to discipleship. Jesus is standing on the shore of Lake Gennesaret and as he stands there he sees two boats and nearby some fisherman washing their nets. First he gets into one of the boats, they push off from the shore and he offers the people who have gathered there a teaching. How many times have we pictured this inspiring scene in our minds eye: the crowds of people lining that shoreline and Jesus out on the water speaking to them about the Kingdom of God?

When he had finished Jesus turns to Simon, one of the fishermen, and says to him: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Now for an instant, just an instant, we hear Simon uttering the words that continue to echo down through the centuries: "Master we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." We've been there, done that, bought the tee shirt and nothing is working! The fishermen down the lake seem to be packing them in but not us! We're all getting older and we don't have any young fishermen wanting to join the crew! I remember the day when the fish were so plentiful they practically jumped right into the boat but times have changed and we were out all night and have caught nothing.

Perhaps with nothing more than the look on his face Jesus says to Simon...I know all of that....I know your frustratedI'm now asking you to believe and trust in me ...get back into your boats ...and let down your nets.

Whenever I hear a story about a boat in the gospels, I think about another story that I first encountered many years ago in one of Anthony DeMello's books. It had something to say to me then but as I stand before this Synod this morning it seems particularly meaningful and important for me to offer it to you on this occasion:

On a rocky seacoast where shipwrecks were frequent, there was once a ramshackle little lifesaving station. It was no more than a hut and there was only one boat, but the few people who manned the station were a devoted lot who kept constant watch over the sea and, with little regard for themselves and their safety, went fearlessly out in a

storm if they had any evidence that there had been a shipwreck somewhere. Many lives were thus saved and the station became famous.

As fame of the station grew, so did the desire of people in the neighbourhood to become associated with its excellent work. They generously offered of their time and money, so new members were enrolled, new boats bought, and new crews trained. The hut, too, was replaced by a comfortable building which could adequately handle the needs of those who had been saved from the sea and, of course, since shipwrecks do not occur every day, it became a popular gathering place; a sort of local club.

As time passed the members became so engaged in internal concerns that they had little time or interest in lifesaving, though they duly sported the lifesaving motto on the badges they wore. As a matter of fact, when some people were actually rescued from the sea, it was always such a nuisance because they were dirty and sick and soiled the carpeting and the furniture.

Soon the activities of the club became so numerous and the lifesaving activities so few that there was a showdown at a club meeting, with some members insisting that they return to their original purpose. Finally these people left and started a new operation a few miles down the shore and their selflessness and daring was such that soon their membership was enlarged, their hut was reconstructed and the mission was soon smothered once again.

If you happen to visit that area today, you will find a number of life-saving stations dotting the shoreline. Each one is justifiably proud of its origin and its tradition. Shipwrecks still occur in those parts but unfortunately the only lights that are turned on are the ones that light the comfortable interior and none shine out into the storm.

My dear friends, Jesus stands before this gathering this morning, he stands before us in the Diocese of Niagara, and, just as he did with the first disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he has one simple message: "Get back into your boats..... head out into deep water....and let down your nets!" And the good news that I want share with you today is that from my vantage point as your Bishop, I can see a number of boats on the water... I can see lots of our members on the shore mending their nets and making their boats more sea-worthy. Even more exciting is the fact that some parishes and parishioners are realizing that they have a good solid boat but no net or they have a net but not enough people to pull in the catch. They are joining forces with other parishes and now they are back out on the water and going to places they could never have dreamed of, just a few months before.

So if this story has anything to teach us or anything to caution us about, what might those lessons be? Let me suggest at least five things we might want to consider as we venture fourth in the coming year:

1. If we are going to chart a new course then we need to know who we are, where we have come from, who we follow and what God's mission asks of us. We heard today in the gospel reading that before he called the disciples, Jesus engaged in the ministry of teaching and it was in the context of hearing the Kingdom proclaimed and articulated that Simon was able to follow in the way of Jesus. Over the coming year I want to call our diocese to a new commitment to the study of the scriptures, to learning more about the faith we profess, to equip our members to share their own stories of faith, to explore practices of spiritual growth, and make new resources available for Christian education and liturgical expression. I am announcing today that a group has already begun to meet who I have commissioned to bring these new resources forward and to make them more accessible to the people of the Diocese of Niagara. "Journeys in Faith" is a new initiative that will find its way into the life of the diocese in 2012.
2. If we are going to head out into the storm then we will need to be people of courage and courage comes from strong leadership, a leadership that inspires excellence, that instills confidence and nurtures a deep trust in the God who sails with us at every turn. It will require strong leadership from clergy and lay leaders alike who are willing to take intelligent risks and to be prepared to fail. In my four years as Bishop, I have had the privilege of experiencing the life of the wider Church both nationally and internationally. I can say with a great deal of conviction that no diocese is better positioned to offer this kind of passionate, courageous and inspiring leadership than is the Diocese of Niagara. People in the Diocese of Niagara join with others across the National Church in giving thanks and celebrating this 35th Anniversary Year of the ordination of women. In light of this wonderful milestone, I would be remiss if I did not pay tribute to the women clergy in our diocese, past and present, who have served the Church with such great distinction and have contributed so much to our common life and work. I want to pay tribute to my gifted colleagues in ordained and licensed lay ministry who continue amaze, uphold and inspire me. As I promised last year I have freed up more opportunities for me to interact personally with the clergy and I will continue to do this in the coming year. I also want to acknowledge our lay leaders, wardens, parish councils, group leaders, lay delegates, diocesan council and committee chairs and members who have a commitment and a love for our Church and for God's mission that often leaves me speechless and overwhelmed.

It is truly, truly a privilege for me to serve with you as your Bishop and I give thanks to God for all the many gifts and blessings we have to share.

3. When we talk about leadership, however, we need also to keep in mind that a lot of speaking and writing about leadership these days is intended to help people increase their personal power and influence. In this year's Archbishop of Canterbury's Lenten Book Barefoot Disciple: Walking the way of passionate humility, Stephen Cherry deals with this subject and says: "Leadership so fascinates us today because it combines two contemporary compulsions: power and celebrity. What an intoxicating combination! No wonder there are countless shelves of books and endless programmes which offer to help us become better leaders, more powerful in our influence over others. The goal of Christian living is to follow Jesus and to share with other disciples in seeking the kingdom of God. The witness of the New Testament is that this requires distinctive virtues: patience, charity... and above all else, humility. Humility is not an option for a few who like that sort of thing. It is not a mere by-product of exceptional discipleship. Humility is central and of essence; indeed humility is, in the context of the new values and new life of God's kingdom, both strength and integrity of character." I believe that if our work of participating in God's mission bears the marks of this kind of humility then it will resonate with and capture the imaginations of those who we are attempting to reach out to. As I mentioned earlier it will also require us to encounter people and communicate in this same way; walking with people, and talking with them not to them. We will need to share our stories with each other as well; stories of where we have found clear sailing and where we have come up upon the rocks. The days of the lone ranger are over in parish ministry! It is absolutely essential now that we share our resources and work together. Our overall theme and scripture passage for this Synod is the passage from Micah 6:8: "...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk **humbly** with your God."

4. The story of the ramshackle life-saving station reminds us that we will probably have to redefine some of our measures of success. In this regard, let me ask you a question: "In the story of the life-saving station, what period in the station's life would we identify as the glory days?" I think you will agree that that answer is not found by using the measures of success that are so present and all consuming in our world today. I want to say, once and for all, please...let's put aside our comments about the church down the street that is packing them in. Let's give ourselves a break ...let's cut ourselves some slack. That is where they are in their journey, this is where we are.... we have things to learn as a Church,

there is no doubt about it, but only God knows how this all fits into the grand scheme of things. Even more radical than this, however, I want you to consider seriously the notion....that this is our golden moment... that at this very moment we are on the brink of our glory days as a Church!

5. As we continue to push off from the shore we will, of course, need to follow our charts and watch for the markers that our Diocesan Vision has outlined for us. I want to thank all those who came to St. Christopher's Church on October 1st, all those who gathered to take stock of how far we have traveled and to fine tune our vision for the next leg of the journey. I also want to acknowledge two people who will be instrumental in this work in the days ahead: Canon Terry Deforest, our Vision Advocate and Coordinator for Excellence in Ministry and Rev. Bill Mous our new Coordinator of Social Justice. I am not sure whether they will be helmsmen, mid-shipmen or deck hands and perhaps a little of each but we welcome them and we are already blessed by their ministries among us.

When he had finished speaking, Jesus said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.... Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

In the coming year may these words of Jesus guide us and strengthen us and move us forward! Let's continue to get those nets mended! Let's get those boats out and unto the water! May we hear and answer Jesus' call to prophetic discipleship with a renewed sense of commitment and passion, that offers a beacon of hope and God's gift of unconditional love to the people we are called to serve.