

Bishop's Charge
Second Session of the 141st Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario
October 30, 2015

Draw your Church together, O God, into one great company of disciples, together following our Lord Jesus Christ, into every walk of life, together serving him in his mission to the world, and together witnessing to his love on every continent and island. We ask this in his name and for his sake. Amen.

“More Together”

I have prayed that prayer many times over the course of my 31 years of ordained ministry, but never has it had more meaning, never has it had more relevance than it has for me today as I welcome you to this second session of the 141st Synod of the Diocese of Niagara. The word in that prayer that is repeated over and over again, as we ask God to bless our life and ministry as a church, is the word, **together**: “draw your Church together into one great company of disciples.” The theme of this Synod is a simple phrase, “More Together.” For me, that beautiful prayer, and the powerful Gospel reading we proclaimed this morning (John 13:1-17), offer the essence of what these words might mean to us today.

Servanthood at the Core

It is St. John's account of Jesus gathering the disciples together in an upper room. In just a few hours, Jesus and his friends and followers would face a challenge and an ordeal that would test the extreme limits of their courage, their endurance, their understanding of who and what their fellowship was all about and it would deeply test their faith in God. For a time they would be paralysed by their fear and their doubts. To move through that paralysis, they needed to find ways to persevere, be clear about their purpose as disciples, and adapt to the significant challenges of their circumstances.

As was the case so many times before, Jesus gathered them togetherour Lord's ministry had always centred upon drawing them and others together. How many times have we heard people whom we have invited to join with us in ministry tell us that they are fine worshipping God in their own way and on their own. My friends, nothing in the accounts of Jesus' ministry; nothing in our experience of who we are or who we have been as Anglican Christians over the centuries supports an understanding that we can exercise our discipleship in isolation. In that upper room he gathers them together and then he does something that I can't believe anyone in that room would ever forget for the rest of their lives. He poured water into a bowl and he washed their feet in a dramatic act and sign of servant leadership.

In his book “Living Toward a Vision” Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that the tools which Jesus left his disciples to carry out their mission of service were a towel and basin. “Tools

determine and define one's trade. If we disciples of Jesus are left the tools of a servant, we can only do the work of a servant. ... a towel and a basin are used to ...make contact with the soiled, sometimes unattractive dimensions of humanity and to carry out our service with loving attention." He goes on to say: "Such a mission can be fulfilled only by people who are not self-preoccupied, who can take their minds off themselves..." so as to focus on their ministry to those living with poverty and need.

Looking back over 140 years, we know that we too have had our share of focus on ourselves and our survival in rapidly changing times. These concerns can deter us from the profound fulfillment of embracing Jesus' example of servant leadership with the tools Brueggemann draws to our attention.

What is sometimes sad about our present reality is that we have bought into the idea that this is something new, that the necessity to change and adapt faithfully to our present situation is a sign of failure or decay. Yet, we have been here before.

An Enduring Observation

Over this past year, we have been reflecting upon some of the great characters and leaders over these decades and Bishop Walter Bagnall's years in episcopal ministry have been seen by many as some of the glory days of the Diocese of Niagara. In 1969, on the twentieth anniversary of his consecration he preached a sermon in this Cathedral in which he said the following:

Since the Anglican Congress of 1963, we have elevated the exercise of self-criticism to the stature of a fine art. There has been a lot of healthy breast-beating, but some of it has been vicious, and for some people this has become a way of life – a daily flagellation. Perhaps the faithful and we will grow accustomed to look for God less and less in buildings and more and more in people. Perhaps the men and women of the new tomorrow will build fewer elaborate shrines to honour God and learn to honour Him by building a society which reflects His love....A church more tolerant, more loving, more alert to the day and the need, moving into the future. In many ways it will be a new church....it may be a smaller church, different in structure, with fewer professional ministers, but many more sharing the priesthood of all believers.

The signs of a changing, rather than a declining Church have been with us for a very long time and, in response to the Bishop's insightful words, I want to say quite emphatically that the dawn of that new tomorrow is right on our doorsteps.

A New Church

I want to share with you some of the ways I believe we have become or are becoming that new Church that Bishop Bagnall spoke of so eloquently some forty-six years ago. I was aided and inspired in this reflection by the keynote speaker we heard from at our recent Provincial Synod,

Dr. William Cavanaugh, Professor at DePaul University in Chicago, speaking on the subject of “Reimagining the Church in the Public Square.”

1) Led by our Diocesan Vision for Ministry and by the Anglican Communion's five Marks of Mission, we are coming to understand ourselves as a discipleship-based Church instead of a membership-based Church. More and more people in our congregations are seeing their lives defined by their baptismal covenant and there is a renewed interest and desire to learn about our Church and our faith, to regularly read and study the scriptures, to create more disciplined and structured opportunities for prayer and to find new ways to allow these new learnings and these experiences to guide and inform the lives we lead.

2) We have become, or are becoming, a Church that sees itself grounded in St. Paul's understanding of how our ministry, our participation in God's mission, cannot be understood apart from our interconnectedness and dependence upon each other. We are coming to realize that we are much more together and we are becoming clearer about where that mission is taking us, where our rich resources reside. Everywhere across Niagara, congregations are engaged with seeking out partnerships with other congregations, other denominational communities and we are working with others in the community who share similar passions for the work we are called to do.

In our New Testament lesson, St. Paul writes: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” As we live out the reality of this way of being the church we are discovering new paths to inclusiveness, new ways to advocate for the liberation of people from all forms of subordination and inequality and we are abandoning, thank God, the fallacy that our task is to make the world over in our image instead of in the image of God.

3) As we accept Christ's challenge to take up that towel and that basin of water, we are becoming a Church that sees itself, in the words of Professor Cavanaugh, not within separate acts of outreach but rather as “a network of living concern.” We are not reaching out in servanthood ministries to those in need simply to solve a problem. It is not an immunizing strategy to shield us from the messy and dirty side of life but rather it is the work of proclaiming the gospel in the midst of that messiness. We are coming to understand that our work is the encountering and recognizing and upholding the divinity of all God's people, particularly those who live on society's margins. We are called to proclaim that, while government aid programs and other social supports are important, necessary and good, they are not the kingdom of God! This prophetic critique is a distinctive contribution that we, as the Church, can make to the common good and it moves us to make other contributions as well.

Living Out Our Vision

In marking our 140th Anniversary as a Diocese, we have been gathering together our resources and pooling our blessings, and I have asked every Anglican in Niagara to contribute to our

Anniversary Fund that will allow us to sponsor up to 50 new refugees. I had occasion last month to travel in Spain where it was obvious from what I observed that the whole continent of Europe is obsessed, and rightly so, with the refugee crisis in that part of world. During the past 5 years, 15 conflicts have erupted or reignited, displacing tens of millions of people. Over 4 million Syrians alone have fled to neighbouring countries. The UN refugee agency expects at least 1.4 million refugees to flee to Europe across the Mediterranean this year and next, a sharp rise from initial estimates. The need for servanthood ministries is clear.

To date, we have raised close to \$100,000 for our refugee sponsorship initiative and two parishes have each raised over \$25,000. I am grateful to all the congregations who have taken up special collections and hosted special services in support of this Fund and I am also aware that some of our parishes are ahead of our program and are already working with sponsored families. About a dozen parishes have expressed interest in sponsoring refugees through the anniversary initiative and as a result of our first application St. James and St. Brendan, Port Colborne, will soon be welcoming two families of 9 people (10 if you count the one on the way!) to Niagara. We will continue to work with community partners and other faith groups on refugee sponsorships; offering wisdom and support through presentations and consultations, and submitting applications through our Sponsorship Agreement with the Federal Government.

When you combine this refugee work with the outstanding work of our Hands across Niagara, our share in the work of the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund, WOW Grants, Leadership Grants from Survive and Thrive, and our local outreach partnerships with various regions throughout the world, all represent our broad commitment to engage God's mission throughout our diocese and beyond.

Guided by our diocesan vision, parishes are discerning ways to align resources of ministry with voices crying out for justice and as we do so, we live out our baptism by committing to justice and servant ministries.

One of our most valued and defining partnerships is the one we share with our sister and brother Anglicans across Canada and that relationship is nurtured, enhanced and shepherded by our Primate and the staff of our Church National. We are so very honoured to have Archbishop Fred Hiltz with us for this Synod. As your Bishop I have a unique perspective on the work of our Primate and, at each House of Bishops meeting, we receive a listing of the dioceses, the events, the meetings and the travel that our Primate is involved in. Just reading the report often leaves me breathless!

Having experienced Fred's ministry very closely over the years, I can state with complete confidence that his life and witness continues to be one of the richest gifts and blessings we have to share in this beloved Church of ours. Fred, on behalf of this Synod, and the people of the Diocese of Niagara, I want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts. There is much happening on the National scene as we prepare for our General Synod in Toronto next year and

we look forward to hearing from our Primate on these and other matters in his address to us tomorrow.

Renewing Our Vision

Eight years ago, in my early days as your Bishop, I called people together from across our diocese to begin a conversation that would eventually help us discern our Diocesan Vision. That Vision has been our guide, our template and our compass for the journey we have shared in ever since. What I am saying today is that it is my strong belief that we are no longer the Church we were eight years ago and that we have moved strongly and courageously toward that new Church and that new tomorrow that Bishop Bagnall spoke about almost half a century ago. It seems fitting then, as we move beyond this anniversary year, that we find a way to gather back together once again and to take a compass reading.

In 2016, I want us to engage in a process that will allow us to gather together once again to engage in some further work of discernment. I expect that these conversations will help us determine how our present Vision needs to be revised or adapted. It will also provide the opportunity for me to connect personally with diocesan leaders and it will create the space necessary for us to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as we chart the path ahead. There will be more information about this process in the days ahead but in the meantime I am asking every parish to use a special prayer throughout Advent as we seek God's blessing upon our work of discernment in the coming year. Copies of the prayer are available today and will be distributed later in the Synod.

Before I conclude this Charge, I want to acknowledge another milestone that has been reached in our diocese that is indicative of the servant leadership that our Gospel story proclaims. This year marks the twenty-seventh year that Canon Rob Welch has served us all in the capacity of our Chancellor. That in itself, is a remarkable gift and achievement -- but what that also means is that this length of service, combined with the years his father, the Honourable Robert Welch served in the same capacity before him, means that Rob and his father have now consecutively served as Chancellors to the Diocese of Niagara for the past fifty years! Rob, words cannot describe what a monumental gift and witness this service has and continues to be for the people of this diocese. We will be marking this milestone at a diocesan event in the coming months but we ask you now to accept our deepest and heartfelt thanks.

The Fire Is Lit

During the summer, I had the privilege of attending the eighth Sacred Circle that was held in Port Elgin, Ontario, focused on the theme "Lifted on the Wings of Faith." Sacred Circles are national gatherings of Indigenous Anglicans for prayer, worship, discernment, and decision-making. Hundreds of participants gather for these special meetings every two to three years. Each gathering begins with the lighting of the sacred fire that burns continuously throughout the course of the week.

The fire-keeper for this Sacred Circle was an elder from Navaholand and he invited young people and other volunteers to come forward and help get the fire started, using the traditional implements that were spun and rubbed together to create a spark. They worked at it for a long time and every once in a while smoke would rise up but no fire was forthcoming. The majority of us had to leave the fire pit and return to the conference centre for the celebration of the Eucharist but a few volunteers stayed behind to continue the effort.

What we found out later was that the elder could have started the fire right away but he withheld some of the knowledge required. In the Navaho tradition a major aspect of the lighting of the fire is the experience of working together with others and the process of learning as they went along. As the rest of us stood together in the celebration of the Eucharist, we were given word that the fire was lit and it was a profound moment and so incredibly symbolic that it should happen as we stood together around the Lord's table as fellow members of the body of Christ.

As we gather together today, and prepare to share in this celebration of the Eucharist..... I have some very good news for you:

The fire has been lit in the Diocese of Niagara and I want to say "Thanks be to God!"