

Charge to Synod
Saturday, November 5, 2016
Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton

Dear friends in Christ,

I welcome you to this 142nd Synod of the Diocese of Niagara and I thank you for the gift of Christian leadership and discipleship that you, as Synod delegates, are offering your parish and all of us in the diocese as we gather in our Cathedral today.

Last year, as we concluded our 140th anniversary as a diocese, I indicated in my charge that it was my desire that we would create an opportunity to come together and to take a compass reading. It was my hope that we could review and critique the ways in which our Diocesan Vision continues to be an effective template and guide on this journey we have embarked upon together as we proclaim the kingdom of God.

When it came to time to gather people together, however, the response was not overwhelming and we can interpret what that means in a number of ways. It may be that the emergence of so many regional conversations and partnerships that we are witnessing in every part of the diocese means that the forum for that kind of discernment for mission and ministry is shifting to a more local engagement. I give thanks to God and am greatly encouraged and inspired by the many relationships that are being developed!

It may also be that people are feeling supported and empowered, for the most part, to move beyond the talking and meeting that we have been doing for what sometimes feels like an eternity and instead, the passion and energy that now exist in the diocese is directed at just getting on with what we believe we are being called to do. I wholeheartedly share in that kind of assessment.

Today, however, I have you all as a captive audience and I too am feeling the need to be guided by our Diocesan Vision's admonishment to be creative and innovative. I would, therefore, like to depart from a traditional bishop's charge to Synod and instead say something about the gospel we have just heard read in our midst, to also take a few minutes to highlight some of the many ways I believe our proclamation of the gospel is bearing fruit, and then I want to put you to work at your tables so that together this Synod can create OUR charge to the Diocese of Niagara as we look to our work together in 2017.

The Gospel reading for this service comes to us from the ninth chapter of Luke's Gospel and the whole focus of this chapter is about mission. At the beginning of the chapter Jesus enlists the twelve disciples to share in his work and ministry: "Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom and to heal." How did the disciples know what to do when he charged them to "proclaim the kingdom?" They knew what he meant because in their time together Jesus continued to paint pictures for them about what the kingdom of God looks like:

1. First and foremost, the nearness or coming of the Kingdom of God is the “good news” which we are called to proclaim. It is full of hope and healing and restoration. (4:43)
2. It is not for the faint of heart...when we put our hands to the plough there is no turning back. (9:62)
3. No matter who else this good news applies to, the kingdom of God is for the poor. (6:20)
4. It can be witnessed to in something as small as a mustard seed that grows and flourishes like a mighty tree. (13:19)
5. The kingdom of God is inclusive. It is a reality for all people, everywhere who strive to make it part of the very fiber of their lives. (13:29)
6. It takes our understandings and our world-views of the measures of prosperity and success and turns them upside down. “Some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.” (13:30)
7. The proclamation of this kingdom is costly. It demands and transforms our whole selves, requiring us to make sacrifices and moves us out of our comfort zones. (14:33)

Upon their return the disciples began to share with Jesus all things that they had done but before long the crowds caught up with them once again and the scriptures tell us that he spoke to them about this kingdom of God. Later that day Jesus did much more than just talk about the kingdom of God ...he gave them a dramatic demonstration of the fact that our proclamation of this kingdom is not just some far off, distant hope and dream.... It is a reality that can be witnessed to and experiencedright here and right now.

Luke’s account of the feeding of the five thousand is a story of the encounter of overwhelming human need and the temptation to abdicate responsibility and to throw up our hands in despair. It is also the story of overcoming those temptations and the gathering up and sharing of the resources that are at hand and above all it is a story of the miracle of God’s transforming love, poured out in ministry and mission to turn hunger into fulfillment, doubt into faith and scarcity into abundance for all. At the end of the day, after all had been fed, their baskets were overflowing.

As your Bishop, I have the unique opportunity of witnessing the breadth of our work and ministry across our diocese and from my vantage point I can see overflowing baskets and a rich harvest from many of the seeds that we have planted and the soil we have tilled as we have journeyed together with our Diocesan Vision as our guide.

A slide show, witnessing the different ways that Niagara’s baskets are overflowing and where many of the seeds have been planted reflecting the Diocesan Vision, was shown here.

The bishop posed the following questions for table discussion:

1. Imagine you are one of the disciples that Jesus sent out and have now come back to share your stories of mission with him. We have just seen photos on the screen of specific ministry initiatives across our diocese. As a parish team, take the sticky notes provided and use as many notes as you need. On each note, write a word or words that identify each of the particular ministries or programs that are being offered in your parish and over-flowing your baskets!

2. Where are we encountering challenges to not turn back, to let our world views be turned upside down, to give our whole selves open to God's transforming love? Please record your answers on the sheets provided.

3. Given your answers to the above questions, what should our new directions and our priorities be as a diocese for the year and years ahead? Please record your answers on the sheets provided.