



**The Bishop's Charge  
to the 147<sup>th</sup> Synod of the Diocese of Niagara  
by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

Saturday, October 30, 2021

*+I speak to you in the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*

A few weeks ago, I was doing some research for a homily - and I stumbled across an interesting fact: over the past couple of years the most searched Bible verse of some 600 million queries has been Isaiah 41:10: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God."

Now of course, this is really no surprise, because fear has become the dominant emotion of our time: fear of a virus, fears of systems which prevent some of us from flourishing as God intended – racism, sexism, and colonialism to name a few, and fear of losing the planet as we know it. These things have produced fear of each other and given rise to new concerns too, as inequality grows, and poverty deepens for many. and systemic injustice faced by Indigenous peoples is more and more evident.

I admit there has been a lot to fear. But that's not really the point of Isaiah 41:10, is it? Because God says, "do NOT fear; do NOT be dismayed." Resting in God's provision and God's protection is the point of Isaiah 41:10.

I also heard somewhere that you simply can't be frightened if you're joyful.

Taken together, that's why Philippians 4:4-9 was the scripture chosen to underwrite this year's Synod theme: Facing Forward: Called to Life, Compelled to Love. At first blush, it might seem a bit odd to choose a passage that begins: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone." But in the context of leaning into God's provision and protection with joy – and it makes a whole lot of good sense to banish fear with hope that is rooted in God's love.

So here goes Niagara: lets take a look at what there is to rejoice in as we face forward: called to life and compelled to love.

First, we can rejoice that the fourth wave is ebbing and that so many of us are now so much better protected against the coronavirus - including all – and yes, I mean all of our active clergy - through vaccination. Now, giving up some of our cherished rituals and practices has been hard and so, facing forward, we're so very glad to now be in place where we can loosen some our COVID-19 protocols, including re-introducing congregational singing. But just let me say this: this, marks an extraordinary step in modifying our protocols and we must be very careful about this. We must still be distanced, sing with masks on, and sing quietly. And believe me, I of all people am going to struggle with the quietly piece. But we know that COVID-19 is primarily spread by aerosols in the air and singing is an activity that produces a lot of these. But my goodness, with the case numbers low as they are, it'll be wonderful to be able to sing the prayers of the Church again as of All Saints Day - November 1st – in thanksgiving to God for all the saints.

You have been so patient and so very caring for each other; we have sought to be cautious throughout the pandemic for the love of our neighbour, and your adherence to the pandemic protocols and our ministry guidelines has demonstrated that love time and again. The pandemic isn't over yet, but we are getting there, facing forward with God's help.

Another change that signals that we are getting there, is that the diocesan Sunday Prayer service I have been leading is in its last weeks. As we wind down what has been a privilege and I hope, a help to parishes and leaders – particularly in the early days of the pandemic, I want to say a word of thanks to all the people who acted as readers and supporters across the diocese, to Michael Bloss and Trevor Price, our accompanists, and a particular word of thanks to Canon Mike Deed, our diocesan liturgical officer who has produced liturgy after liturgy in this season, and to Archdeacon Bill Mous – the technological wizard behind the whole enterprise.

What else do we have to rejoice about? Well, there is The Bishop's Company too. It's important to celebrate when we can: and we had a wonderful evening doing just that back in May when we invited Steve Paikin to be a guest for our Bishop's Company event. It was a good evening of conversation filled with great stories about Ontario and insights about our society and the issues of our day- all dedicated to the work of the Bishop's Company.

And in just under a month, we'll have another opportunity as I host a conversation with +Stephen Cottrell – the Archbishop of York. The archbishop is a good friend to our diocese and one of the most startlingly original and compelling communicators in our Church. But he's also deeply embedded in the secular world as a thoughtful writer on politics and civic responsibility. As his wisdom and wit are just too good to keep to ourselves, we've opened up the invitation to hear and engage with him to the whole Church. I hope you'll invite all your friends and family to come and enjoy some time together with him. Again, all proceeds go to support the Bishop's Company – an important fund that helps me to support our ministry leaders in times of difficulty.

Now it will not have escaped your notice that I had the pleasure and privilege of ordaining four new deacons and a new priest for our diocese last month. Randy Williams, Rob Duncan, Matt Gillard, Rob Jones deacons, and Michael Coren, priest. We are blessed by the combined talents of them all. And the good news doesn't end there. We have many more candidates for ordination in our diocese who, God-willing will be ordained over the near future!

The future Church is beginning to take shape in a few places even now! We have engaged two church planters this year to discern new ministry in our diocese: we welcome Rob Miller and Susie Kim as missionaries, discerning new forms of ministry in our midst so we pray God's blessing on both of these folks and look forward to what God is doing through their leadership.

It's been a genuine pleasure to visit the remarkable lay leaders around our diocese to bestow the Order of Niagara. Truly ignited by the irresistible love of Jesus, these folks have worked out their Christian vocations in as many ways as there are people. It's such a joy to recognize the light of Christ that shines out in their contributions to our common life. That's a lot to celebrate and we're all deeply grateful for their faithful dedication – it is a long obedience in the same Gospel direction.

Well, imagine our joy as the hard work of 18 months of planning came to fruition with the launch of the Niagara School for Missional Leadership. This is a school to support lay and ordained leaders to learn new skills for ministry. We have 6 courses ongoing now, and a full complement for two additional terms in the New Year. Our teacher-practitioners are drawn from all over the church universal and it's exciting to invite them to share best practices with us. I am indebted to our Chair, Mr. Michael Smith, and to all the launch team members for their dedication and expertise: Archdeacon David Anderson, Beth Green, Chris Houston, Canon Christyn Perkons, Archdeacon Bill Mous, Archdeacon Michael Patterson, John Bowen, and Gillian Doucet-Campbell. I can hardly wait to see where God will take the school. And I give thanks for our generous supporters, without whom the first steps of the school could not have taken place.

Canterbury Hills is definitely something to be joyful about. Against all the odds, we were able to offer a day camp program for our beloved Canterbury Hills this past summer. So many thanks to our outgoing Director, Emily Lloyd for her extraordinary leadership. We wish her well as she moves on to other things. And thanks to all the counsellors and the board who made this year's camping program possible. In terms of future plans, we're hoping that next year we'll be in a space to offer an overnight camp once again. We're in the process of hiring a new director – who will help guide a renewed faith-formed camping ministry. Thanks be to God for all the developments in this ministry which continues to be dear to the hearts of many in our diocese and beyond.

It's a good thing to be able to celebrate the ways in which the Spirit dwells richly in our mature leaders.

And here I'd like to pause and recognize three people whom I, in concert with our dean, am appointing as new canons of our Cathedral Church:

The Reverend Bahman Kalantari: Bahman has been a faithful, humble and much-loved pastor. He cares deeply for all his parishioners and channels the love and joy of Christ in his vocation. Bahman has served St. Mark's Orangeville, St. John's Burlington, and the Church of Our Saviour The Redeemer, Stoney Creek.

The Reverend Sue-Ann Ward: Sue-Ann has helped several ministries dream big, engage their communities, and build up for ministry, as the founding executive director of HARRRP, the co-rector of St. Luke's Palermo, and as rector of Grace Church Waterdown which is expanding its footprint with Bobby's Place to better serve its community. Sue Ann also serves as the Regional Dean for Trafalgar.

And, Chancellor Greg Tweney: Greg has faithfully served as our diocesan chancellor since 2018, generously sharing his wisdom and measured, good counsel with me, the Executive Archdeacon and the diocese. In particular, Greg has been instrumental in revising our diocesan Safe Church Policy, and working to establish a Safe Church Resource Team for the ecclesiastical province of Ontario. We are deeply grateful for his loving service.

So I congratulate these new canons of Christ's Church Cathedral. We honour your ministry among us and give thanks for your commitment to the Church of God.

+++++

Philippians 4 continues, . . .

The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We all know the toll on mental health that this pandemic has taken. And for those who care deeply for those in their cure of souls in our parishes, that toll has at times had an untold depth. We have all experienced a kind of existential weariness. Sometimes we need some help to keep going, and some help to continue walking with our people in the midst of their pain.

So, in order to make sure that we are supporting our leaders, I've asked Canon Terry DeForest to create an extension to our Employee Family Assistance Plan. This he has done with characteristic attention to detail and care, and so our clergy and licensed lay workers now have the ability to access more counselling than previously – when and if needed in this time. If that is something that would be helpful to you, please be in touch with Terry and I know he'll be only too happy to help.

Now, you'll notice that we have begun to set aside funds for what's called differentiated curacies in our missional budget. Let me tell you a bit about what these are and why we need them

First, you need to know that this is an act of faith in the future. We are investing our money in leadership development because we know – by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ – that there IS a future – and that it's going to be exciting, and that right-skilled leadership is a crucial part of it.

Our ordinands come from – thanks be to God – many different backgrounds ready for a transformational and educational exchange: they come ready to offer their gifts and we are ready to impart our own. Each mature priest is the product of the formation of many parishes as well as teaching rectors. To that, they bring their own gifts and the blessing of the Spirit who has set them apart to exercise those gifts on behalf of the Church.

But we have a functional issue: and that is, most of our ordinands will not begin their incumbencies in a large, urban parish. There is a shape to the vocation of priest, and it is mirrored in Luke 16:9 – “whoever can be trusted with small things can then be trusted with large things.” And here I want to be clear that I am not speaking of small or large parishes – rather, I am speaking of the development of the smaller and larger gifts of leadership. You see, the vocation of priesthood is shaped by the intersection of the gifts and skills that leaders possess and the intersection of those skills and gifts with the needs and dreams of parishes in which we serve. Spiritual responsibility has everything to do with co-creating the Kingdom with the help of the Holy Spirit - wherever we are called.

So, having funds like this will augment the investment that a parish will make so that an assistant curate can help the ministry of a parish flourish. It will support the learning of skills in a particular context: village, town, or city. It'll help us build many skills that are appropriate to context: whether in a resource rich environment or in a community that runs effectively and lovingly on a shoestring; a parish that leans more mature or a church plant that leans younger. All of these and many more learning contexts will support our investment in building the leadership skills of our clergy.

This budget item is called “differentiated curacies” for a reason; because the learning environment is differentiated according to need and gift and so are the outcomes. So, we will have people who will discover a gifting for rural ministry and some for church-planting. We will have people who will discover a calling to work with the street-involved and those will discover that they are born to minister with children and young families. You see, it's only in this way – as we invest in our leaders that we will discern both where God is leading us and the skills and tools that God has given us in the servants the Lord is raising up as we have need of them in our diocese.

We are also building the ministries of prayer and supplication through the support of Alpha and Revive. My thanks to our Revive coordinator, Canon Leslie Gerlofs and to Tom Vaughn for leading the Alpha team. This is crucial foundational work for the renewal of faith in our parishes and I commend both programs to you.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has written a beautiful book of reflections through the pandemic called *Candles in the Dark: Faith, Hope and Love in a Time of Pandemic* and in it he says this: "Each of us knows that our wellbeing is bound up with that of our neighbours. And so every individual decision we make has to be made in full awareness of the implications for the whole community" (p. 83).

In an interview on the same book, he also said this:

*To be a Christian is to be in politics – which is the art of human living together – and people of faith have perspectives on how we ought to be living and working together. We have an interest in seeing deep and authentic humanity being nourished. And we have a duty to challenge whenever that deep and authentic way of living is sidelined or diminished whether it's by inhumane policies or inadequate educational provision or whatever. The political is inevitable.*

Those two thoughts together are profound. And you might hold them both in your minds as you consider the motion before Synod from Climate Justice Niagara: the conclusion of which is deeply important. We know the many concerns in the climate crisis. We know that we as stewards or caretakers of the earth – a sacred charge given us by Creator – have been failing in that responsibility. We know that our young people are experiencing existential anxiety on a scale that has never been felt before. We know that the choices we make or do not make now as individuals, as churches, as countries will have a direct impact on the lives of our children and our children's children. And therefore, in order to demonstrate our love of neighbour, and in order to fulfil our God-given duty of stewardship, we must use what influence we have as a faith community to urge private and public action to change the course of current climate policy. It's time to make some noise about taking care of God's creation. But may I make a suggestion? Why don't you ask the young people in our parishes to join you in doing that and support them in working out our collective beliefs in conviction and action. We need to do that intentionally and commit our resources to this purpose. This is the most urgent moral crisis of our time.

A similar commitment on our part is to the work of the Anti-Racism Working Group. You'll hear more about their mandate and their goals in a bit. But let me say this: this is Gospel work. Transforming unjust systemic thinking and action in our midst is a work of obligation and a work of love. I am so very grateful to Naomi Kabugi for her principled leadership of this process – and for all the members of the working group.

This work is not easy and it takes bravery to face where we are complicit with the principalities and powers that walk among us – even in the Church – even among good people.

This work goes hand in hand with our ongoing commitment to foster reconciliation, laying bare the truth of our sinful past, acknowledging our wrongs, and lamenting our complicity with the residential schools' system. Together, we must face forward to a future which God envisions; one where treaties are fully honoured, where the culture, history and beliefs of Indigenous peoples are respected, and where our structures and systems are decolonized.

+++++

The wonderful translation of the Bible called The Message renders our last verses 8 and 9 of Philippians 4 like this: “Summing it all up, friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.”

Well, Niagara, there are many good things to meditate on. Much to set our eyes on as goals that we will press on toward.

Let’s start with those goals. The scriptures tell us that the God of mission has a Church in the world. From Genesis to Revelation, that is God’s message.

As you can see and will hear, we’ve been working hard at living into our diocesan Mission Action Plan this past year.

You know they say that you can’t tell when an ocean-going vessel is turning in the water - if you stand at the front of the ship. It’s only when you go to the back and observe the wake that you can see the progress, and see where we’ve been. Well, I’d like to suggest that it is the same when you want to observe the progress of a diocese. If you haven't already, please do read Canon Christyn Perkons’ report in the Convening Circular which is a terrific summary of what we have been doing to fulfill the mandate you gave us last year for the MAP.

Coming out of the Mission Action Planning process for the diocese is a Parish MAP Process. This has been created by Christyn and it is her magnum opus. We are putting the finishing touches on it in time for Advent. It’s appropriate to begin a new Church year with a focus forward on mission. It is my hope that just as the diocesan MAP helped us identify our ministry priorities particularly with regard to reaching those outside our churches, so this process will do the same for parish ministry. It will help us each find our mission in our parish context and will sharpen our sense of identity in our wider communities. It’s my prayer that it will be widely used across the diocese in the coming year.

Closely related to understanding our mission in local context, is the issue of resourcing the priorities we’ll be identifying.

A consideration of that might include a capital campaign in the near future and this coming spring, we'll be exploring this with some intention by embarking on a feasibility study and we'll be ably led through this process by Gillian Doucet-Campbell.

There is also much to give thanks to God for as we consider the “true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, and gracious” among us.

First, and most importantly I am thankful for all of you – As I am fond of saying to the Order of Niagara recipients, the Church is you all. The diocese is all of you: the gathered communities of people who follow the way of Christ. For no other reason do we exist but to do exactly that – operate out of the knowledge of God's love for us and for all humankind and seek to be the face and hands of Christ in our communities. And I am constantly moved by the way that you inhabit your beliefs and offer the outworking of those beliefs to your parishes, to the geographical parish that you have spiritual responsibility for, to the wider diocesan ministries that you support with your time, your vast talents and with your resources. And for the ways in which you likewise support the whole Church.

I am thankful to our clergy and licensed lay workers – When I institute a new priest into a parish, I ask the new clergyperson to join a ministry which is “mine and thine” in each parish. We are bound to each other in a shared vision with a clear sense of purpose and importance. And it is to, in Jesus' name:

“Care alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.” The clergy promise that “by [their] words, and in [their lives,] [they will] proclaim the Gospel. Love and serve Christ's people. Nourish and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come.”

It is my intention and prayer that working together in trust and mutual responsibility we do so with genuine compassion and care for each other. I want to thank our clergy and licensed lay workers for the fulfillment of their ministry among us – often this past year – under great strain. Their faithfulness to their varied callings is crucial to the life of the Body. I also want to say a word of special thanks to many of our retired clergy, especially those who have served in interim ministries at times of real need in these past years. They have been crucial to our continued health and I am very grateful for the ways in which they've brought their accumulated experience to bear on a number of difficult situations. We could not have moved forward without their help.

There are two people in particular without whom I simply don't work/can't work. They keep me straight and organized and they try to keep me disciplined – that is no mean feat because I'm not very compliant – not that they'd ever say that out loud – they're far too loyal for that.



Canon Alison D'Atri. I am her sixth bishop. That length of service represents a true and deep commitment to our diocese - and to every bishop she has supported and steered. The flexibility needed for that has come in handy this past year as we have had to make change after change to the way we function. And Alison has rolled with it with the same grace and steadfastness that she always does. She makes me laugh on the good days and knows just how to commiserate on the less good days. I say this every year but it doesn't make it any less true: Alison, your price is above rubies I am profoundly grateful for you.

And my thanks to Bill: reliable, thorough, attentive, supportive, judicious, a fine interlocutor, respectful, an independent thinker, a people and a change manager, a partner in crime and above all a communicator, . . . I could say all this and much more about Bill. I am grateful to him for all his many gifts and the ways in which he has offered them in service to me and to our diocese. The pandemic has drawn many previously unknown skills from us all but I want to highlight and very intentionally praise a particular gift that Bill has brought to the table: we have had no outbreaks of COVID-19 in our diocese – thanks be to God. And I think that's an affirmation of our protocols and of the clear communication of the same. Bill's untiring research and translation into workable protocols, his rapid responses to the many inquiries as we puzzled our way through the constantly changing Covid landscape, the clarity of his communications week by week, have collectively lowered our stress and provided us with clear information in a time of confusion and uncertainty. And we – I – am deeply grateful. I know the pandemic is not done with us yet, but his work has made it so much easier to walk through this crisis together thus far.

And yesterday morning Archbishop Anne Germond wrote to me to say the following: "Bishop, would you please express to Synod my deep thanks for the leadership of Archdeacon Bill Mous at the Provincial Synod level over the last two years." Bill is, like our other diocesan staff who represent us in the Councils of the church so ably, an Ambassador of Christ.

Bill, I know you hate this, but you must allow me to thank you publicly once a year. What I have said doesn't even touch the sides of our – my – appreciation. So thank you and bless you and may God grant us many more years of good ministry together.

I must also thank Our Dean. Dean Tim Dobbin joined us in Niagara on January 1st. Now this has not been an easy road – he didn't even meet many members of the parish of the cathedral until recently. The fact is, I prayed for a ministry partner and that is what the Lord delivered. Tim is a strong, supportive presence and a man of deep prayer and an ability to listen with the ears of the heart. I am grateful for all that he has done to lead Christ's Church through the last 9 months and look forward to a long future together.

As you can see by the convening circular, we are so very well-served by the work that our staff do from children and youth ministry to outreach and justice, from property management to the intricate and crucial work of those who support payroll and diocesan finances, and in many more areas besides. I use the word “service” advisedly – the staff who do all this work, do it in service to the Gospel. We are so very well served by our diocesan staff who move mountains with their exemplary work ethic each week. And so, I thank them on your behalf for their dedication.

As I do our Senior Leadership team: Terry DeForest, Christyn Perkons, Jody Beck and Gillian Doucet-Campbell work very hard to enact Synod’s priorities, support programming and fulfil every aspect of their subject specialties. I am proud of, and grateful for their gifts – gifts that are recognized across the wider Church as they serve beyond the diocese in the councils of the church - as well as in it. Thank you for all that you do to make the name of Jesus known in your various ministries.

Jody, of course, is nearing the end of her sojourn with us having served as our treasurer and director of finance for more than a decade. She began her ministry at a very tenuous time in the life of the diocese - in the wake of the global financial crisis and she ends it now as the pandemic is waning. Bookended by crisis, through her strenuous efforts, we emerged from the first in a much stronger place in order to navigate this most recent storm with grace and hope.

Over the years, Jody’s leadership has opened new opportunities for God’s mission and helped revitalize our policies and practices in several areas. She has made significant contributions to the governance of the diocese, including her work with this body, and the synod’s various financial committees, as well as the boards of Canterbury Hills, and St. Peter’s Day Care.

Many of us also know well the contributions Jody has made to our common life and the ways in which she has cared for us, supported us. We know that she has brought character and good-natured fun to our work together and we will miss her very much.

So, on behalf of Synod, I thank you Jody and I know that we all pray every blessing on the many new adventures of retirement ahead. And I would ask that the members of Synod please keep Jody and her family in your prayers during this time of transition.

Thanks also to the members of Synod Council. One glance at the enormous scope of the work that Synod Council undertakes on your behalf between synods is cause enough for grateful thanks for all their time, expertise and commitment. We are well led by your representatives. Bless you all for the work that you do in Jesus’ name for our diocese.

Well, my friends, as I draw my charge to a close, let me say this: despite the tragedy and difficulty of the pandemic; despite the fear that has characterized this time, we have done our best to rest in the provision and protection of the Holy One who gives us joy in the midst of adversity and strength in a time of weakness.

And you know, that's been enough. It's been enough for us to carry on being the Church; to carry on being the face and hands of Christ as we face forward in faith and hope and love.

God has indeed blessed us, as the Franciscan Benediction says: with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.

I have spoken to you, foolish as I am, in the name of that same God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.