

Charge to Synod March 20, 2010

Much has been written and debated upon in the quest to understand and describe the period of time that the church finds itself in, in the present age. For some of us it was Loren Mead's book "the Once and Future Church," published in 1991 that first challenged us to see that the church as we know it is at a critical and profound point of change. For many it has been the work of people like the speaker at our Clergy and Lay Workers conference this year, Alan Roxburgh and others like him who have helped us see that the work and the ministry of the church is not about the church's mission but rather it is a response to the missionary initiative that comes from God alone.

Phyllis Tickle's recent book *The Great Emergence* talks about the fact that the church cleans out its attic about once every 500 years and Harvey Cox's new book: "The Future of Faith" divides the Church's history into three distinct periods: the age of faith, the age of belief and the age of the spirit. He states that "Christianity, which began as a movement of Spirit guided by faith, soon clotted into a catalog of beliefs administered by a clerical class. But now due to a number of different factors, the process is being reversed. Faith is resurgent, while dogma is dying. The spiritual, communal, and justice-seeking dimensions of Christianity are now its leading edge as the twenty-first century hurtles forward, and this change is taking place along with similar reformations in other world religions."

However you choose to frame it or speak about it, there is no doubt about the fact that we, in the church, find ourselves on the edge of something very new and very different And as I have said before we don't yet know what it looks like and what it will all mean for the ministry you and I hold dear and share.

One of my Christmas gifts this year was an iPod, a small device the size of a credit card that stores an amazing number of songs, pieces of music, audio books, radio programs and podcasts of all kinds and at first I didn't think I would ever use it. (This seems to be my default position on anything new that comes my way these days!) It turns out, however, that it is the perfect thing for someone like me who is on the road and travelling a great deal of the time. Like everyone of my vintage, the first thing I did after I opened the gift was to look around the room for the first available young person to show me how to use it.

It has allowed me to revisit some of the music and bands that I listened to over the years and one day I was taken aback as I listened to a song by the British rock artist Sting recorded in 1993:

"If I Ever Lose My Faith In You"

You could say I lost my faith in science and progress
You could say I lost my belief in the holy church
You could say I lost my sense of direction
You could say all of this and worse but

If I ever lose my faith in you
There'd be nothing left for me to do

Some would say I was a lost man in a lost world
You could say I lost my faith in the people on TV
You could say I'd lost my belief in our politicians
They all seemed like game show hosts to me

If I ever lose my faith in you
There'd be nothing left for me to do

I could be lost inside their lies without a trace
But every time I close my eyes I see your face

I never saw no miracle of science
That didn't go from a blessing to a curse
I never saw no military solution
That didn't always end up as something worse but
Let me say this first

If I ever lose my faith in you
There'd be nothing left for me to do

I had heard this song many times without paying any attention to the lyrics but now I can't believe how profoundly it sums up the context for ministry that we find ourselves in at this present moment... In all kinds of ways the people of this generation who we have lost from our churches and those who have never been here before, are telling us, challenging us, and crying out to us, to help them find something or someone to have faith in and for too longwe haven't been listening.

If Harvey Cox's assertions have any merit and I believe that they do; if it is true that faith is resurgent and that the spiritual, communal, and justice-seeking dimensions of Christianity are now its leading edgethen we have a choice to make as we continue to be the people of God in this moment in our life as a diocese and as a church: to live in denial and just spend more money and work harder and harder doing what we have been doing ... or we can begin to ride the wave that is emerging and moving across our diocese; an exciting and inspiring movement of the spirit that is calling for us to tap into this resurgence of faith and to find new and innovative ways to be the bearers of God's transforming love in the world and to participate fully in the missionary initiative that comes from God alone.

In embracing our new Diocesan Vision I believe we have said yes to this latter option and I want to say to you, having travelled around the Diocese and talking very personally to the people of Niagara for the last several months, that the signs of this “Great Emergence” and this next reformation are beginning to appear! In the telling of part of my own personal faith story and the invitation that followed something powerful and inspiring has been unleashed across the Diocese that has given us new hope for the future.

I want to particularly acknowledge this today because as we come to this Synod this morning, at first glance, the agenda looks more like a step back into old patterns: budgets that look much the same and task forces, governance models and a focus upon the structures of the Church but it is clear now that it is going to take us time, perhaps a great deal of time, to work out how we continue to preserve the richness and the gift of who we are as Anglican Christians; what is important and vital about the way we have lived out our lives as followers of Jesus Christ and at the same time determine how we respond effectively and positively to ways that God is reshaping us and recreating us for ministry in the days to come.

The reports that are being offered today, will give you some indication of the enormous amount of work that has been undertaken, in a very short space of time, by the members of FAC, the Budget subcommittee, the Vision leadership teams and two task forces. On behalf of us all I want to express a profound word of thanks to the Chairs and members of these groups who have worked so hard and with such dedication to have moved us this far along in the journey. As I see it, there are three priorities that we need to address in order to allow our new Vision to be fully integrated into our life and work in Niagara:

Firstly, we need to ensure that the structures and decision making processes in the Diocese are reflective of and fully support of the vision to which we believe we are being called.

In February Synod Council commissioned a task force chaired by Canon Rob Fead to carry out the mandate that will be presented here today over the course of the next twelve months. It is also true that because this Governance review cannot be carried out in isolation from our ability to resource and fund our work as a Diocese, the Financial Advisory Committee and Budget Sub-committee will have a share in this discussion. In fact we all have a stake in these discussions and we are presently looking at what a process might look like that will help us to have a conversation across Niagara, that will focus on how our sense of mission will reshape and renew who we are as a Diocese and what that means for how we support and resource the work that God is calling us to undertake.

Secondly, we need to continue the process of getting our financial house in order. The FAC and Budget sub-committees have worked tirelessly to prepare for both this budget and the one that will be presented in November for 2011 and under the leadership of the chairs of these committees Judy Conning and David Eccles a real spirit of energy and co-operation has developed that has generated a new sense of enthusiasm and hope for the future. A Bishop's Financial Task Force has been working on identifying a number of measures that will allow us to address our deficit and cash flow challenges and you will hear more about their progress in a few minutes time. You need to know that we are well aware that solving our financial problems and solving our resource issues will unlikely involve securing more money, in fact it is more likely to involve spending much less money but it is important that we make these decisions with a clearer sense of what we are being called to do and to be, and I believe that we are taking the steps necessary to bring us to that position.

Thirdly, we need to provide parishes and parish leaders with the support, the resources and the encouragement they will need as they discern the ways that God is calling them into mission. This will, in part, be the work of the Vision Petal leadership teams and we will hear from them later in the Synod.

It will also require the work of staff and trained volunteers to offer the kind of direction that our Vision calls for and as you all know one option for providing some of that leadership was to develop a Synod Office Staff position. The release of the Human Resources/Ministry Support position profile to synod delegates has, in my mind, stimulated further debate and discussion around how we can best address our needs at the present time and it would seem prudent that if the budget is passed we hold the money set aside for that position and to place it in reserve until later in the year when we have a job description worked out and we have a clearer sense of our financial picture in 2010.

I have been out of the country for a couple of weeks and when I was working on this charge the gospel passage we were focusing upon was from the last Sunday before Lent, the account of the Transfiguration, and I believe this gospel story offers us a profound truth and an important cautionary note as we continue on this exciting journey.

In this miracle story, Jesus called Peter, James and John away from the normal course of their routines and are led them up onto a mountain and there they experience the events of the Lord transformed in dazzling array, surrounded by swirling clouds and accompanied by notable leaders of Israel's political and religious life. Elijah and Moses literally drop in and begin to have a conversation with Jesus and in this powerful, mystical experience; Jesus is identified as the Son of God.

I don't believe, however, that the point of this story is really about a miracle happening on a mountain top even though that is what the scriptures tell us happened. I believe that this experience was meant to help the disciples truly see the miracle that was there and had always been there, right before their eyes, in the life and the person of Jesus Christ and the miracle of the life that they shared with him.

The caution that the gospel offers us comes in the form of the disciple's response. Do you remember what they said after this incredible moment had taken place? "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" ... In essence they were saying ... wow that was wonderful... now let's put up a building ... let's get the structures going!

This is the kind of Jesus we all long for ... the kind of God we all search for; the Jesus who shines like a beacon to lift our eyes from the suffering and injustice around us. As one commentator puts it, we are "like the disciples who want to erect dwellings and preserve the moment, we are tempted to hold on to this Jesus, capturing him in stain glass images that offer appealing distractions from our present reality."

In the context of the suffering, violence and injustice of his age, in the midst of the suffocating political and religious hierarchies that existed in that ancient world, the miracle of Jesus life and mission broke through the darkness and allowed the light of God's love and hope and peace to shine through. I believe that you and I are being challenged to let that light shine into the darkness of our own generation, to see clearly the miracle that is our own lives and our own calling and to help others to see the miracle of the presence of the living God, a miracle that is there right before our very eyes, everyday....to be made known in the lives of people all around us who are crying out for something to have faith in once again.

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My friends as you listen to the Vision Petal leaders presentation this morning I think you will agree that we are poised as a Diocese to take up this challenge offered to us by the people of this generation and to be the fertile ground where this "Great Emergence," this "next reformation,"

this “resurgence of faith” can take hold and grow. Having had the privilege of meeting with many of you face to face last year at our Vision meetings ... listening carefully to your hopes and dreams for the future, experiencing first-hand the love and the passion you have for this “Holy” Church of ours, I can say with great conviction that I have every faith in you and every faith and incredible hope in the ministry we share together.

Let’s get our budget organized, let’s make sure that the ways we function as a diocese supports our work of participating in God’s mission for our lives and for the world....it’s so important that we do this and do it now and get it right... but let’s make sure it doesn’t bog us down and paralyze us and prevent us from seeing and experiencing the miracle that is there before our very eyes....this miracle that is own life and our calling to be the church and the people that God is calling us to be.