

Bishop's Charge
136th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
Friday, November 12, 2010
Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton

We have just had the privilege of hearing four people speak about the ways that they have been blessed and gifted by God in their life and what that has meant to them and I think that it would be an appropriate way to begin my remarks by sharing with you just a few of ways I know I have been touched by the hand of God in my work as your Bishop.

One of my greatest joys in this ministry is the opportunity to visit with parish congregations on Sunday. I can't tell you how uplifting those visits continue to be for me as I travel around the Diocese. We have many beautiful church buildings and so often they are the most well maintained and cared for buildings in the community. The welcome I have received in every parish I have come to has been nothing short of overwhelming and I have enjoyed so much the opportunity to preach and encourage and challenge our congregations in the work that we share together. The coffee hour afterwards is always a great highlight and our discussions are characterized by a healthy balance of concern and excitement for our future.

Throughout the course of the year we have asked people across the diocese to enter into a dialogue around a number of subjects and each time we have had a strong response to those requests. Many of you have taken the time to think deeply about a particular challenge we are facing and have written or communicated very thoughtful and helpful pieces of advice or you have helped to clarify the need to better explain the direction we are taking. Often what accompanies this kind of correspondence is a subsequent offer of help and I believe the level of engagement that we have with people across the diocese is at an all time high! In all of these ways you have demonstrated that you share the great passion and love I have for the work that God is calling us to do and I count that as one of the richest blessings I have been given as your Bishop.

Just as much a blessing to me are my colleagues, the clergy and licensed lay workers of the diocese, who serve with such faithfulness in the pursuit of excellence in ministry. I am so grateful to them for the wonderful outpouring of support that I have received in the early years of my episcopacy, far more than I could have imagined possible. I want you to know what an honour and privilege it is for me to serve with you. There is no doubt that God has touched my life through your lives. It is my intention, over the coming year, to devote more time to building up these relationships and to share more fully in the joys and challenges that you face, both personally and as you offer dedicated servant leadership in the congregations and ministries with whom you work.

It is my hope that we can create some new ways to gather together more regularly, with those who wish to do so, to share the challenges of providing transformational leadership. At our Clergy and Layworkers Conference this year, Alan Roxburgh challenged us to share the things we have learned from our successes and our failures and to cluster together to form working laboratories that will help us build and grow a mission-shaped church.

I want to make sure that we begin to put the necessary support systems in place and that we have these opportunities to encourage and network with each other. I want to be a significant part of that network of support and I am committed to freeing up the time to make that happen.

Among the many other blessings that I could mention, as I reflect upon all the ways that God has touch my life through this ministry of ours, is the gift I have been given in the colleagues that I work with at Cathedral Place. Our road over the past two and half years has been a bumpy one and we have seen several departures, but I believe that a real and functional team has emerged over the past months. I am filled with gratitude and admiration for the way we have pulled together as a staff. You work so very hard and with such love and devotion for the parishes and people of Niagara and your personal support of me has been unwavering. Your passion and energy touches every facet of our life as a Church and your work is a blessing not only to me but also to all of the parishes across this diocese.

And so we **are** richly blessed, as I have stated many times before. Those gifts reside in the baptismal ministry of the people who make up the Diocese of Niagara, served and supported by lay and ordained leaders to be disciples and the people of God. I believe that now, more than ever, we need to resource, support and uphold this ministry to the best of our ability. Let me share with you one of my favourite stories, one that I hope will remind us why this undergirding of our baptismal ministry is so vitally important.

Many years ago, an explorer set off on a long and difficult journey to South America in order to explore and chart the Amazon River. He encountered a number of obstacles and overcame many hardships but eventually he reached his destination and there he found an exciting new world, one beyond his wildest dreams, full of wonder and amazement. He met people who had a very different perspective on life, with a whole new set of priorities and insights and in time as the explorer continued to search out and to experience this new found region, he realized that no matter what the future had in store for him, his life would never be the same.

But soon the time came for him to return home, to share what he had witnessed and experienced with others, and on the way back the explorer pondered many questions. How could he ever put into words the feelings that flooded his heart when he first came face to face with the mighty Amazon? How could he express just how deeply he was moved by the sights of the exotic flowers, and the night-sounds of the rain forest. How could he express the range of emotions he felt when he sensed the danger of wild beasts or paddled his canoe over treacherous rapids?

The explorer decided that the only way that this journey could be complete for him was if he took up the mission of encouraging others to go and make their own explorations. This was really the only way that such a profound experience could have real meaning in his life. And so regardless of how totally inadequate he felt, as he arrived back home, the explorer set out across the land to persuade and support others to become explorers themselves.

And so the story of the explorer who felt called to inspire others is a story that offers us some helpful insights into the work that we will all share as we gather together for this 136th session of Synod ... but the conclusion to that story also comes with a very strong warning to all of us who provide leadership in the Church today.

You see, as the explorer began the work of telling others about his trip to the Amazon River, he decided to create a map that would help to guide them on the trip he hoped that he would inspire them to take. But unfortunately what happened was that the people fixated on the map. They framed it; they hung it in their town hall. They made copies of it and all who had a copy considered himself or herself an expert on the Amazon River and sadly very few left their armchairs to go and experience this wondrous place for themselves.

This story is an important one for us on several levels. I believe that too often, we who are called to invite others to share in the life-changing journey that is our walk with Jesus Christ, too often we who are challenged to inspire others to seek out a relationship with the one who creates and restores and makes all things new, too often we who are called to this great mission given to us in our baptism, have allowed people to settle for a map instead. Too often we have settled for a map ourselves.

In the past we have drawn people to our buildings, we have memorized the prayers in our prayer books, we have engaged in all kinds of activities. But as important as these things are, they should never be confused with the wonder, the joy and the peace that can only truly be experienced when we discover for ourselves the living presence of Christ in our midst and when that discovery compels us to into action.

My friends, I believe that at this important moment in the life of our Church and our Diocese we need to reflect upon the journey that God is calling us all to undertake as a response to our baptismal covenant: what does that journey look like in each of our lives? What does it look like in our parishes across Niagara as we wrestle with the same kinds of questions that faced the Amazon explorer? How could he ever put into words the feelings that flooded his heart when he first came face to face with the mighty Amazon?

As part of the reflection following this Charge, you will be asked to express how you might communicate something of the joy and wonder of your own Christian journey because when we are able to do that for ourselves, we are then able to encourage and support others in their desire and search for such an encounter in their own lives. We can create more opportunities to nurture the faith and the spiritual journey of those already among us, so that those looking to us for evidence of the power of the gospel will find it in our life together as servants and witnesses of God's reign.

In our Gospel reading this evening, Jesus tells the familiar story of a man who was violently assaulted and left at the side of the road half dead. Two religious leaders came along as they were on their way to serve in the temple and the rules of the temple stated that touching a corpse would make them unclean and unable to fulfill their religious duties. So they had a choice probably a difficult choice: to disrupt the plans they had on that day and to make a real difference in the life of another human beingor to go about their business and ignore the suffering and the very real need that confronted them And we all know the choice they made!

For me these religious leaders had fallen into the trap of upholding the map rather than the journey. They were faithfully following the rules and regulations, but by telling this parable Jesus is saying that any map that allows us to get on with our own agendas and pass by on the other side isn't worth the paper that it is printed on.

So I encourage you to reflect with great joy on the blessings that you have received as a member of God's family in the Diocese of Niagara. In a video that was created leading up to the pre-Synod regional meetings I spoke about creating a "buzz" and your responses to this reflection tonight will contribute to the "buzz" that we are attempting to generate.

Over the past year we have been engaged fully with the work of allowing our Diocesan Vision to flourish and grow in parishes across Niagara. I have had a number of Rectors send me the results of visioning work that they are doing at the local level that uses the Vision as a framework for their strategic planning and I am grateful to those who have taken the lead in this way. I know too that others are planning visioning days in the coming year. My biggest concern, and the concern of many in the diocese, is that our Vision would become nothing more than a graphic on a piece of paper or that it would become the map that is framed and hung on the wall. Our fear has been that only a few of us would take the next step of getting into the boat and paddling up the Amazon.

We want to move now to take our Diocesan Vision to the next level and we want to make sure that we are equipped and fitted out for the journey. I know that not all of us are explorers at heart, I know that some think dry land is a very good place to be (thank you very much) and I know too that in the Amazon River there are crocodiles and piranha. I know because I have been bitten once or twice myself. But you and I both know in our hearts that the status quo is not an option if we are prepared to lead our Church into the future that God is calling us to meet. Let's decide here and now that a framed map on the wall isn't what we are prepared to settle for, not in our own lives and not in our congregations. Let's make our Vision live in every corner of the diocese.

I have spoken and written to you in videos and in a letter concerning our 2011 budget and about the strides I believe we are making in the long term goal of restoring our financial health. I don't think I need to say anymore. I do however want to express my sincere thanks to our new Treasurer, Jody Beck for the incredible job she has done in such a short period of time. As we continue to work through the recommendations of the Bishop's Financial Task Force, with the able assistance and advice of the Financial Advisory Committee, and with our renewed focus upon stewardship in the coming year, I know that our goals can and will be accomplished.

I began my Charge by talking about the blessings that I have received over the course of the last year and I would be remiss if I did not mention the people whose ministry has been a particular gift to me in my work on a day to day basis: our Chancellor, Rob Welch, our Dean of Niagara, Peter Wall, our Executive Officer, Michael Patterson, our Secretary of Synod, Rick Jones, our Archdeacons and Regional Deans, the Vision Leaders and Leadership Teams, the members of Synod Council and all the various members of the many committees and groups that met over countless hours; to all of you I express my personal debt of gratitude and the thanks of the people of the Diocese of Niagara.

Finally I want to say a special word of thanks to the two wonderful people who work in the Episcopal office and pull everything together in the midst of many challenging days; Alison D'Atri is one of Niagara's great treasures, not only to me but to all of us in the diocese and Karen Nowicki has worked her magic once again in getting everything ready for this Synod. Once again, to all of you my heart-felt thanks for all that we have accomplished!

How could he ever put into words the feelings that flooded his heart when he first came face to face with the mighty Amazon? How could he express just how deeply he was moved by the sights of the exotic flowers, and the night-sounds of the rain forest. How could he express the range of emotions he felt when he sensed the danger of wild beasts or paddled his canoe over treacherous rapids?

Tonight my question to you is this: How will you put into words and actions the feelings that have flooded your heart? May God continue to grant us the strength, the courage and the gift that we have in each other for the journey that lies ahead.

AMEN