

Bishop's Charge to Synod

November 15, 2013

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this 139th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara. I want to begin by thanking Bishop Spence and the staff and people of our Cathedral congregation for their assistance in hosting this important event. I also want to thank our Secretary of Synod and all the members of our Synod Office staff for the many ways you have gone above and beyond the call of duty in support of this meeting. As you all know, this year we are particularly focusing upon and celebrating the partners whom God has given us as we engage in God's mission for the world. We will have a chance throughout our gathering to acknowledge and welcome many of our partners and hear about our common ministries.

At the beginning of our time together, I want to celebrate our global partnerships, ecumenically and in the world-wide Anglican Communion. As a special instance of those partnerships, I want to particularly welcome Bishop Griselda Delgado del Carpio from our companion diocese, Cuba, along with her development officer Dr. José Antonio Bringas Linares. Bishop Griselda has ushered into her diocese a bold new vision and approach to ministry development by equipping lay leaders with skills to come alongside God's work in their communities. José is coordinating much of this work, with the support of PWRDF and other partners, and I am filled with admiration for the work they are undertaking in Cuba. We are so honoured and proud to be your partners in Christ and delighted to have you both with us at this Synod. We look forward to the official signing of the renewal of this partnership and are equally looking forward to both Bishop Griselda and Dr. Bringas addressing us later today.

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. John 6:5-10

Countless sermons have been preached on the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, a story that appears in one form or another in all four gospels. There are so many things one could focus upon when reflecting upon this passage, the mountain top experience and the echoes in this story of others throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. There is Jesus' desire to feed the hungry and to nourish those who follow him, and of course it is difficult for us to hear these words without connecting them to the Eucharist that will continue to unfold throughout this Synod, as we too, take bread, and give thanks, standing together as members of the body of Christ around the table of our Lord.

As we begin this Synod today, however, I want to think for just a minute, about Jesus' question to Philip about the resources they had at hand: "*Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?*" The question wasn't, "Are we able?" or "Do you think we should?"

It was a question that presupposed an affirmative and proactive answer. It was a challenge and commission to seek out those resources and to make something happen.

I also want to think about Philip's defeatist and less than optimistic response to the question: "*Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.*" We cannot be sure of the sentiment that was being expressed by Philip on that day but given the enormity of the situation he could have been excused if it sounded more like this: "It would take me six months to pay for this crowd just to have something to eat.....there is no way we can provide for them we don't have the resources the situation is hopeless!" This morning I want to consider how many times we have uttered these words or words like them.... in our own lives, our parish meetings, our diocesan councilshow many times have we given in to the temptation to accept and be satisfied with the fallacy, the myth, the lack of faith that expresses itself in the belief that as Anglicans we are destined to be a dying and a decline-ridden church for, my friends, nothing could be further from the truth.

Finally I particularly want to reflect upon the young boy in the story who is brought forward by Andrew and who is almost always over-looked when this gospel is read and commented on. It is my understanding that children in the ancient world had little or no status in society and yet, time and time again, Jesus' ministry embraced the one who is unexpected, the least likely, the innovative, out-of-the box solution. In this passage the resources came from one who had so little; nothing more than five loaves and two fish. In the end, however, all that was required was a disciple who believed that all that we need has already been provided; our God is already active in the world and in the lives of people everywhere and that we are called to make those connections and let God do the rest.

On her website "Dancing with the Word" (DancingWithTheWord.com) and in response to our gospel reading today, Lutheran Pastor Dr. Janet Hunt recounts this wonderful story that seems perfect for us today:

"Several years ago I served on a bishop's staff. It was early on the Friday morning of the first Synod Assembly he would preside over. For such gatherings one always wants things to go smoothly, but never more than the first one. The evening before, we had been out to dinner with staff and officers. The meal was cut short because of the terrible storms that blew through. When the restaurant lost power we knew it was time to call it a night. As I drove home the evidence of the storm was all around me. Whole oak trees had been pulled up by their roots. When I arrived home I discovered I was also without power. I was certainly grateful when I heard it click on at 1 a.m. but a few hours later I found myself in the basement hard at work with a shop vac.

It was still very early when I ran upstairs to pick up a ringing telephone. It was our bishop calling. Apparently at his hotel they were still without power. It would probably have been a sleepless night for him anyway, but this really gave him something to focus his anxiety on. He spoke aloud of seven hundred Lutherans who would be driving into town in a few hours and he wondered then about how we were going to feed them if there was no power... He had already worked out an answer to his wondering, though, for in his next breath he suggested that in the next couple of hours I call every Lutheran church in town and ask them to put out a call for charcoal grills. "We'll set them up on the football field," he said. "And we'll make sure everyone is fed."

I can still remember standing in my pajamas and smiling to myself as I listened. I assured him that I was certain Augustana College (the site for our Assembly) had everything well in hand --- but I promised I would get over there early to be sure. Sure enough when I arrived a little before seven o'clock the lights were on, although our hosts told us they were just minutes from renting a refrigerated truck to preserve the food waiting to be served. In the end, seven hundred Lutherans were fed in the usual way that week-end --- having no idea how close they came to being part of a miracle much like the one those who first followed Jesus experienced so long ago.”

As she concludes her commentary Janet Hunt asks this question: In a crowd of 5000 plus, I wonder how many even recognized the miracle that was happening right before their eyes? What a wonderful question! And I want to ask you that same question as we begin our Synod here this morning. In fact, I want to ask every parish and every member in the Diocese this question: Do you recognize the miracle of God's transforming work in the ministries we are engaging in together, in the connections we are making, in the partnerships we are forming and in the loaves and fishes that we are bringing forth in every corner of the Diocese and beyond? Will you see the miracles happening in our midst over the next two days.

I want to say to you, as emphatically as I can, that I am seeing this wherever I go. I see God transforming us, overwhelmingly, in the reports of the convening circular, on every page of the Niagara Anglican, on our Facebook page and through our Twitter feed. I see it on parish websites and Sunday bulletins, I see it in the creative, moving and well-planned parish liturgies that I preside at, and just as importantly, in the questions and the profound comments I am hearing as I engage parishioners in the coffee hour afterwards. I see it in the shift that is happening and has happened in the focus of the Parish Councils, Corporations, Parochial Committee meetings and regional gatherings that I attend on a regular basis. It is a shift from a membership-focused church to a mission-shaped, discipleship-based church and this is so apparent when I think back to some of my earlier meetings six years ago.

I want to thank my clergy and licensed lay worker colleagues for their faithfulness and dedication in their vocations and I want to thank our lay leaders and members of ministry teams across the Diocese for the outstanding leadership you are offering in challenging and exciting days. In congregations large and small, rural and suburban, traditional and contemporary, the miracle of God's transforming power is taking us to places and engaging us in ministries that we could not have asked for or imagined!

Earlier this week I made an emergency trip to my first parish in Newfoundland for the funeral of a dear friend and I was struck, as I sat in the rectory that we had lived in some 29 years ago, just how much life in ordained ministry has changed. I went to that parish with clear expectations about my role and about the work that would consume my days. There was no social media or Fresh Expressions to envision and the people who made up the three towns I served all belonged to one denomination or another. The phrase “spiritual but not religious” was unknown to me in those days. It wasn't all peaches and cream, however. I did have to do battle with an ancient Gestetner each week and I always had more ink on my hands and clothes, than I did on the paper.

To the clergy and licensed lay workers of the diocese, I want to say how much I admire the work you are doing in these dramatically changing times. You inspire and encourage me and I am so grateful for the passion you continue to have for the work we share in as we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in this generation.

I am also grateful that so many of you have participated in diocesan *indaba* gatherings around liturgy. These *indaba* gatherings have given us an amazing opportunity for building new relationships and understanding within this diverse community of ours.

I know that there is a cost to each one of you in ordained ministry, both physically and spiritually and I want you to know that I understand this, that I experience it myself and I am concerned and committed to the practice of supporting and assisting one another in every way possible. God bless each and every one of you!

We have some immediate challenges to set our sights on in the coming year and I want to say a few words about the issues that I believe have a significant impact upon us as a diocesan family:

Canterbury Hills Conference Centre and Camp, a separate entity from the Diocese since 2000, has run a deficit for the past five years. Summer Camp registrations have decreased dramatically despite efforts at broader marketing. And despite concerted attempts to increase bookings at Bagnall Lodge, Bothwell House and the cabins, rental income is down. At the same time, the facilities are aging and maintenance has been restricted to absolute musts which has left all of the structures tired, worn and in need of renovation. The accumulated results are dismal.

While the Canterbury Hills Board has been keeping Synod Council apprised of operational losses and their work to address the financial issues, I feel strongly that I need to address this issue with you, the members of Synod. To my dismay, the current receivables for Canterbury Hills are at an all time high of over \$400,000. Synod Council recently received an in camera proposal from the Canterbury Hills Board of Directors that may allow us to address this deficit. While I cannot disclose any details at this point, I am comfortable assuring Synod that the burden of this large deficit is likely to be addressed by mid-winter. In light of the proposal, Synod Council voted to continue carrying the deficit for the time being. The Canterbury Hills Board is working closely with diocesan leaders to address the deficit, while at the same time, the Board is committed to re-imagining their mission and programs to sustainably meet our shared goals.

Our Hands Across Niagara campaign is one of the most dynamic and life-giving programs we have engaged in as a diocese for many years and yet the support that it has received from clergy and people across Niagara is less than overwhelming. It is an initiative that allows us take up the challenge that is offered to us in our Diocesan Vision to support servant and justice ministries in every region of the diocese. It also provides us with an opportunity to support national outreach initiatives and to bring money into our local congregations. The National Church, in partnering with us in this way, has experienced a significant decrease in their portion, in comparison to past contributions to the Anglican Appeal and this is of great concern to me. My personal and passionate commitment is expressed through a monthly donation to support this work.

I urge everyone in the Diocese to join with Susan and me in supporting Hands Across Niagara as generously as you are able and I ask the clergy to make sure that this program is promoted in every parish.

Cathedral Place in many ways is at the very heart and centre of our common life in Niagara and, in a very real sense, it is a home that unites us and binds us together in a whole host of ways. Hamilton is in the midst of a dramatic revisioning process and is now the leading community for new development in all of Canada and perhaps in North America. It is so good that many years ago we committed ourselves as a diocese to this city and to the challenges and opportunities that are in evidence here and that is true not only at the Cathedral itself but in the innovative and creative work that has emerged in Anglican parishes across Hamilton.

It is also true, however, that our presence here at Cathedral Place has come with a cost of its own and we must acknowledge those costs and concern ourselves with the issue of long-term sustainability. I want you to know that the Dean and I have been actively pursuing a number of options and in October an idea was presented in camera to Synod Council which was received with a tremendous amount of affirmation and excitement. There is still a great deal of work to be accomplished before it can be brought before Synod and I am delighted to announce that Archdeacon Lynne Marchant has agreed to accept my appointment as Chair of the committee that will carry this work forward. The committee has been identified and a first meeting has been scheduled with the mandate to bring an initial report to Synod Council by late spring. Lynne has resigned her position as Rector of St. John the Evangelist, Niagara Falls, and as Archdeacon of the Region of Brock, but will remain a non-territorial Archdeacon in recognition of the importance of this work in the life of the wider Diocese. She will now work out of the Synod Office continuing her part-time work in the area of Stewardship with the ongoing financial support of this position by the National Church. This is truly a time filled with hope and encouragement in which the Holy Spirit continues to empower us to live out our Diocesan Vision in new and wonderful ways!

Earlier in the year we saw the departure from Synod Office of our Executive Officer, Michael Patterson and I need to say that the past few months have brought new meaning to the old saying: "you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." Michael, we are so very grateful for the gift your work has been to us all in the Diocese of Niagara and we wish you every blessing in your new ministry at the Church of the Incarnation. Michael's departure, while challenging, has offered us an opportunity to think creatively about roles at Cathedral Place. I am so very grateful to the members of the management staff who have accepted, without hesitation, their new responsibilities. It has not been an easy transition at times and I want to offer a sincere word of thanks to all our Synod Office staff for the incredible job they are doing in service to us all. I'm also pleased to welcome Brian Reusch, our new program consultant in Children, Youth & Family Ministry, who has just been licensed as a professional lay worker. Brian is already deepening relationships with parishes, bringing a fresh perspective to our shared ministry, and developing new community partnerships.

One of the items that fell to the back burner in the wake of this reorganization was much of the follow-up work that is necessary in response to the Governance Task Force report from last year. You will hear, however, from the Reverend Sue Channen, later in the proceedings, that this item has not been forgotten.

In the coming year I am asking Synod Council to consider two matters: First to make provision for the Brock and Lincoln regions to be brought together into one unit and I am happy to report that Bruce McPetrie will serve as Archdeacon for both regions as we work towards making this happen. Second, in light of Synodical practices throughout Canada and our diocesan vision, I am asking Synod Council to undertake a full review of our own process with consideration for the frequency, the venue, and the scope of business undertaken at Synod.

A final word of thanks must go out to our Chancellor Rob Welch who continues to offer, so generously and graciously, his time and wisdom to me and to the Secretary of Synod. I am also very grateful to the Archdeacons and Regional Deans for the outstanding leadership they have given and to the chairs and members of our diocesan committees for their tireless offering of their time and talent as we work together to build up the body of Christ here in Niagara.

In closing I want say that it is my hope that you have come to this Synod with the intention of entering fully into this great celebration of all the many ways that the transforming presence of the risen Christ is inspiring us to go out to the world. I hope we will acknowledge and rejoice in the miracle that is right before our very eyes, that God has already provided all that we need to make the connections and form the partnerships that will be required to proclaim this gospel of hope and love to the people God is calling us to serve. Just in case you think we have come to the end of the road, let me remind you that immediately after the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus follows that up with the miracle of walking on water and so I look forward to seeing what that miracle looks like, in your parish, as I make my visits and as we engage in this ministry together, in the year that is to come.

Thanks be to God! Amen.