



**The Bishop's Charge
to the 148th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

Saturday, November 5, 2022

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I stand before you – as your bishop – in a bit of a quandary. A quandary because I am deeply aware that we are in a liminal space here this morning. If I am too negative in my reflections, then I am relying on what is seen only in this moment and am not trusting in God. If I am too positive, then I risk not seeing clearly what is in this moment. So, here we are, in this liminal space. May God speak through these words.

First, let me say that I know many of you are scared. I can feel the anxiety in the room and in the many meetings and conversations I have every day with parishes. This anxiety is one of those roaring lions in 1st Peter we talked about last night.

I also know that you're feeling vulnerable.
And I know you'd like me – us – to fix it.
Fix it so that money is not the roaring lion you need to fear anymore.
Fix it so that the people come back – and that the ones we've lost to death and disinterest will be replaced by new committed, energetic, and generous givers.
Fix it so that things don't feel so fragile.
Just fix it.

I wish I could fix all that too. Truly I do. But you know I can't. And you know that's not the way this works. God is the one in charge here. The way it works is just how Saint Peter states it in his letter: 'Cast all your anxiety on God because God loves you.'

I stand here in humility, as your chief shepherd, with a fair sense of where we are and where we need to go in this liminal space. I also have a sense about something else: that we have to embrace where we are right now – and not try and escape it, push it away, or even avoid it. That our very liminality is part of our journey together – part of what brings us together so that we can resist the lions that prowl.

But there's more to it than that. Because while we come together to discern our present and future, we are the people who expect God not only to care for us, but to work for us: I want us to remember that we expect God to act, especially in moments such as this.

And just as we heard last evening how Archbishop Jackson of the Masai – a tribe of nomadic shepherds – fought a roaring lion by coming together in the midst of fear and confusion, so too as the body of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, will we vanquish the roaring lions of anxiety, scarcity, and negativity borne of a fear that seek to divide us, and separate us from the love of God, and God's loving purposes for our world.

What I know for sure is that we will not manage our way through the multiple crises we are facing. That is not possible for us – it is not even possible in the secular world in these times of what the Oxford English dictionary calls permacrisis. Pandemic, war, inflation, supply chain issues, rising cost of living and any number of unexpected or so-called once-in-a-generation issues throw even the best planned and articulated fiscal planning off.

No. What is open to us as people of faith, is just that: to move forward in faith. Now faith is not certainty, but it is an attitude of expectation: of expecting the God of life to act. We are constantly and deeply listening for God's voice and acting in faith, monitoring that action, harvesting learnings, and then listening again – and slowly by the grace of God, sticking to God, sticking to each other, we discern our way forward. It's not a comfortable place to be because we are essentially dependent upon God and each other, but that is the way of the Church – always has been.

Let me return to that attitude of expectation. We are shortly – in a month or so – to enter a whole liturgical season dedicated to the fact that we are a people who live in expectation that God will act in our world – powerfully, forcefully, miraculously for good by bringing into it a Saviour for our redemption. We are a people who because of our faith in Jesus Christ; are also called to pattern our ways after God's ways – to become more and more like Christ individually and corporately. We are a people who expect to partner with God to co-create the kingdom right here, right now. We are a people who expect, who lean with the wind of the Holy Spirit that brings change, and life and growth. We are a people of expectation, ignited by the irresistible love of our Saviour, Jesus.

So. It seems to me that we are in an already and not yet space right now. We have been moving – with faith, hope, and love - through the ravages of the pandemic and we still have a way to go yet. Let me remind us all that we are only midway through the 3-5 years that has frequently been the forecast for the pandemic. There is still water to go under this bridge. And we are feeling the effects - as a result we feel slightly smaller in person. We are feeling poorer – by our own standards – but we are not poor – more on that later. We are tired and we feel discouraged. Some of that discouragement is warranted but some needs a corrective based in reality.

For instance: and let me clear – what follows is not to deny our recent experience, but it does put it in necessary context. We are all concerned about attendance: through the necessary closure period, we faced some attrition – through death, movement, and attenuation of relationship. All unfortunate; mostly all unavoidable. But fact, nonetheless. Anecdotally, where we stand mid-pandemic, is that our people have returned at a rate of 50-65% generally. I know there are places where the figure is lower or higher but this seems to be the average, if slow, trend.

Our online numbers have mostly remained strong though, which is interesting. That is an added constituency that have come to our communities who, for a variety of reasons have not been able to attend church in person before now. It's important to acknowledge that these online numbers are real; church is real for them – sometimes a lifeline – and our investment in technology with which to welcome them is a now permanent and real fixture. This is a creative addition to our worship and Christian education and community offerings across the diocese. It is here to stay – and those people who access us online may well become in-person disciples over time – that's mission in action folks and it is an area of growth and we must continue to embrace it.

Let's talk about other numbers too. We have experienced some worrying attrition in our stewardship as well. Our diocesan revenue is forecast to be down about 23% in 2023. We all feel that drop. That is why our pre-investment draw deficit is so high. And we are all drawing on our rainy-day funds to buy us time to recover from this downturn. Thanks be to God for our forebears who have provided us with the wherewithal to weather these multiple storms. I know on All Saints day, this was one of the many reasons I felt particular gratitude for the saints who have gone before us in this diocese wanting to make sure that ministry could thrive for decades – in a few cases – a century after their own earthly pilgrimage was complete. It is, in part, because of their generosity that we can continue to be the presence of Christ in our communities, by investing in our common mission and the support of our parishes.

And I know you are all feeling the pressure of lower revenue. It's a kind of steady, anxious drumbeat. But it's important to distinguish between how something feels and what is actually happening in fact. Based on some careful analysis done by our Treasurer, Kemi Okwelum, we have discovered the following:

- Nearly 80% of parishes assessed using the three-year rolling average for their Diocesan Mission and Ministry contributions will see a reduction in their 2023 DMM compared to 2022. This means that across the diocese we will have assessed parishes at over \$400,000 less in 2023 than in 2022. Because the formula was adjusted only five years ago, it is now a more compassionate and progressive one, that better tracks with parish income – taking account of the peaks and valleys we have been experiencing. This pandemic period has

proven the wisdom underlying the formula change and it has been our first large scale test of its efficacy.

- In addition, we know from those parishes on a single-year assessment, that 2021 showed a positive change in revenue; it would seem that many parishes within the diocese are rebounding from their low water mark.

These are facts – not feelings; signposts that are reminding us of God’s daily provision. I am not saying things are fine and that there is no cause for concern. I am saying there is built-in help for the period of recovery we are in, and there is cause for some cautious optimism if parishes continue on this same trajectory.

As you can see, we are watching our situation very, very carefully as we chart a faithful course into the next season of the Church’s ministry. And we are living into the expectation that recovery is not only possible, but because our ministries are vital, recovery is probable. But only time and our efforts will tell whether it will be a full recovery or not. What I do know is that if we expect failure, that is what we will create. So, let us cast all our anxiety on God, and put our whole trust in God as a policy – as a way of being. If we pray and work in expectation that God’s provision will prevail, the picture will be different. This is not Pollyanna thinking. This is faith, hope, and Godly work in action.

Now, before the pandemic we were already in stormy waters – we knew that – we really did know that. And by God’s grace our scriptural image for writing our Mission Action Plan was Jesus calming the storm. I wonder if you remember our cross-diocesan consultations in the “before times”; the special day of prayer and discernment we spent at the cathedral together, dreaming together? And the result of all that was the MAP. The Mission Action plan for the diocese of Niagara – a direction to travel in by the Grace of God for three to five years.

Little did we know that we were about to enter seriously stormy weather with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now what do you do when the weather is stormy, when you don’t know what is ahead of you; when you are unsure where to go? You need to follow the MAP. You must follow a map out of the darkness and the confusion - together. So that’s what we’ve done and are doing. Canon Christyn Perkons has been the keeper of the MAP process and she’ll give us a more granular update later today, but I want to bring you along with me now to see a few MAP ministries that have flourished in the past year.

Our first articulated goal was to: create and implement opportunities to ignite and strengthen faith.

And the primary vehicle for this has been the Niagara School for Missional Leadership, the NSML.

There are incredible educational offerings through the school: Christian Foundations, and Adaptive Leadership in Anxious Times, The Rural Church: Fostering Relationships without Shortcuts or Can Business be Mission? How everyday Christians can influence businesses for Mission - to name a few. And lest anyone think they are only for the ordained, let me assure you that they are for the whole of the body of Christ. We have very intentionally made sure that they are for every Christian – we are all laying hold of our vocations as Christians as never before and we all need encouragement and support in that. In addition, as the shape of theological education continues to shift in these times, our diocese has been working a little ahead of that curve.

The NSML now has a full training programme for deacons – and anyone seeking orders as a deacon in Niagara will be required to complete these courses to fulfil their educational qualifications for diaconal orders. The programme is accessible, contextual, and financially reasonable. And our school is supporting other dioceses around the country now too in their missionally shaped Christian education and spiritual formation. It is, by the grace of God, making a difference for our whole Church. If you are interested, please visit the website and/or speak with Carrie McFarland, our very able and kind NSML coordinator. This school is a vehicle to strengthen and ignite faith and to nourish the seeds of mission-shaped leadership in us all.

Our second goal was to: Reimagine diocesan culture and adapt our structures to enable ministry and mission.

This past year has been one of continued transition and change. It's been good but very hard work. We have bid goodbye to many of our long-term and faithful Synod staff: to Canon Jody Beck, our former treasurer; to Archdeacon Terry DeForest, our director of human resources; to our beloved Canon Alison D'Atri, our executive administrator; and to Gillian Doucet Campbell, our director of stewardship and development. And we are about to bid farewell to our much loved and much valued colleague Canon Christyn Perkons. For each, it has been time for them to imagine a new chapter in their lives. We – I – am so grateful that they travelled with us through the worst days of the pandemic when we needed their experience and deep knowledge of the diocese. We miss them all very much in their own ways.

As we have waved goodbye to our faithful and dedicated directors and support staff one by one, we have also seized the moment for reorganization, redeployment, and careful stewardship of resources. We no longer have a director model of senior leadership. We are leaner and we have right-skilled our staff for this present moment with a communications coordinator and two missionaries – one focused on shaping our parishes missionally and on their support and development and another dedicated to turning outward to our communities to work in partnership to make Christ's name known and to plant

new forms of ministry. We have taken a moment of loss and used it to mission-shape our structures. In so doing, you will see in the budget that we have been able to realize more than \$100,000 in savings in personnel costs of the diocesan office.

Continuing our focus on leadership, over the past three years we have continued to build a fund that supports our ability to train our new clergy. One of the challenges we have experienced - and which has grown to crisis point in recent years is that often seasoned clergy with gifts and best practices and creativity to share have been in parishes that for a variety of reasons have not had the resources to support a curate – or trainee priest. Now that means we have had to leave opportunities on the table for good training in unique circumstances. Well, not anymore. We have a differentiated curacy fund where I am now able to offer assistance to parishes to employ a curate for a period not exceeding two years. I ask that parishes contribute sacrificially to this employment, but I am now able to assist. This is a really exciting development and a significant investment in the leadership of our diocese. It's also a recognition of the fine leadership we currently have in our clergy corps and a way to share the human resources of our diocese as equitably as we are able. We will continue to build our investment in this fund and to use it well.

I am pleased to say that we now have a healthy succession of candidates for ordained ministry in our diocese, as you may have noticed at our recent ordination services. And we have four candidates for holy orders with us today assisting at Synod – I wonder if you could wave and let Synod see who you are: Charles Meeks, Monica Romig-Green, David Montgomery, and Mike Degan. Thanks for your help here among us today. And members of Synod, please introduce yourselves to these folks who are offering themselves for leadership in our diocese.

We are also investing in leadership in other ways. It's been my pleasure to welcome Archbishop Colin Johnson, former metropolitan of our Ecclesiastical Province and longtime Bishop of Toronto as an assistant bishop in Niagara. I am grateful for his presence with us. Archbishop Johnson, with his great gifts for leadership, among other things - will be helping to organize mentoring and coaching support for our leaders – as a very supportive and positive development.

In the last part of our MAP, we say that we will: prioritize social justice action with an emphasis on environmental justice.

I want to thank, most sincerely, Sue Carson for her long leadership as the chair of our Climate Justice Niagara committee, and before that Greening Niagara. Sue has retired from this position to take up a new national profile in the Net Zero Churches movement which you can read about in the Anglican Journal. Irene Pang has ably taken over this most vital ministry with Deirdre Pike's, our program consultant for justice and outreach, very able support as a staff person.

Now we all know – even if the World Health Organization had not declared the climate crisis the single biggest threat to human health – that this is the most crucial issue of our time. We all know that. Storms like Hurricane Fiona that devastated our eastern seaboard and forest fires that terrorized communities like Lytton, B.C. are no longer flukes, one-off's. They are now normative. And that is a scandal. It is a scandal that we can allow these things to be normalized and accepted. It is an affront to the Creator and an affront to the body of Christ that we could – when the power to change things lies in our hands – let our fellow humans languish in pain and bewilderment because of the ravages of the climate crisis.

One of the things that came home to me forcefully at the Lambeth conference – where the climate crisis was a first order issue – was the power of corporate action. Did you know that we are 85 million strong around the world? That Anglicans are in 165 countries? That we are the third largest Christian denomination in the world?

Now, 85 million individuals are not able to do much. But, as I listened and talked to people from as far from our experience as Madagascar, South Sudan, Pakistan, the Solomon Islands, Liberia, and many more places, I began to realize that if we are in relationship – if we hear and connect with each others' stories, and if we act together, 85 million people acting to save God's creation can move the needle on the climate crisis. It's possible. Being part of a movement such as the Communion Forest – an initiative of the Anglican Communion that seeks to be involved in the protection, restoration, and creation of forests, wetlands, grasslands, and coastal habitats - is a way that we can globally work together to combat climate change.

In addition, we Anglicans are 20,000 or so strong in the diocese of Niagara. Individually, we can change a lot of lightbulbs; we can drive a number of electric or hybrid cars; and we can compost and recycle a lot. That's all great – it really is. All climate action is good action.

But. Where we can make a truly significant contribution for our children and our grandchildren and fulfil our baptismal vows, is in acting together – corporately – in speaking our values and beliefs in the work we have been entrusted with – to safeguard creation. Folks, it's time. Won't you join me as we advocate for our concerns as Christians? For God's creation? For solid, sustained action on this most important issue? For our children and grandchildren who have not created this crisis but will have to live with it?

You know, I had the privilege of interviewing both Elizabeth May back in the spring and more recently Dr. Katherine Hayhoe, climate scientist and exemplary Christian and Canadian – and to a person they urged me to urge you to act as one – corporately – as the body of Christ. 20,000 Anglicans can move the needle on this if we make sure our elected representatives know this is a priority for us and neither we, nor it are going away.

The responsibility for the care of creation runs like a skein of gold throughout our scriptures and through our prayer books. This is first order business and our children and grandchildren need us to act and to not be complacent. Climate Justice Niagara will lead us well in advocacy and by coordinating our involvement in movements like the Communion Forest.

So. There you have it. Three examples of how – in this liminal space of discontinuous change – in this time of great anxiety and anguish for the future of our Church, that we have been working carefully, intentionally, expectantly and following our MAP through the present and on into the future. And God has blessed our faith in the future.

You may have wondered why we began the diocesan MAP in the first place. Well, there was madness in the method, as my grandmother used to say. You see, at first it was to give voice and missional shape to our ministry both corporately at the diocesan level and locally at the parish level. That in itself was a worthy endeavour which gave new energy and birthed new ideas. But we also did it with the view, that at some point, we might undertake a capital campaign in order to resource the vision.

But then, well, pandemic. It seems every sentence ended with that word for a while. But we are in a place now where we are beginning to explore that next step again with a feasibility study. Every MAP vision needs resourcing. It's in this way that we will lean expectantly into the future.

Now look, the lions are still there. But we know how to resist them; we know we must resist them. But we can only do that together, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and ignited by the irresistible love of Jesus. Time and again I have seen how we are doing just that through our parishes, as a people called to life and compelled to love. So, we go forward, sticking to each other, sticking to our MAP, diligently doing our part - expecting God to provide what we need when we have need of it.

That's the template of faith in this and every generation – as Saint. Peter says, Resist [the lions], firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your [siblings] throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Now comes the time for thanks. This has been a bittersweet year in terms of the Synod Office staff. So much institutional history and experience has exited the building and at the same time, so much new energy and fresh perspective has entered in. I am so very grateful – on your behalf – for both. So to Carrie, Connor, Emily, Jane, Sarah, Kemi, Kim, Debbie, Abiola, Trish, Lorna, Mackenzie, Derek, Bill, Christyn, and Deirdre, my deep thanks for who you are and how you so diligently and unwaveringly serve our diocese.

The diocesan staff are here to come alongside and serve all our parishes. I have been humbled to hear over and over again your thanks to them for their dedication, patience, and expertise. I know how much we need each other in this time.

I'd like to add a few specific thanks. To Kemi: you have stepped into a crucial position as our diocesan treasurer and director of finance this year with confidence and with a love for the Church you are serving. Thank you for the extraordinary efforts you have gone to in order to give us stability and confidence in this time. We are blessed to have you.

To Jane Wyse whose competence takes my breath away. Jane knows what I need before I do – she is the very picture of support. I am deeply grateful for the way in which she has seamlessly stepped into the role of my executive assistant. Jane your price is above rubies.

Canon Christyn Perkons. Let me express my personal thanks to you as you move ever closer to retirement. Your heart-deep love for our diocese – for every parish and every ministry and your knowledge of its history – and your hopes and dreams for its present and future are inspiring. But it's watching your faith in action – the faith that underpins all that other stuff – that's really the gift. Thank you for demonstrating that outworking of faith in Jesus Christ in works of love and words of mercy.

Thanks to Tim our Dean. Mr. Dean, your honesty, compassion, and intellect already mark you out as an extraordinary Christian leader. But to add to that you are a cherished partner in prayer and a co-labourer in ministry – and we are blessed to have your leadership both as the rector of our mother church but also as the dean of the diocese.

My profound thanks of course to Archdeacon Bill Mous. Bill possesses a rare skill set: he is as interested and diligent in his approach to the most academic of canon changes and to the most complicated and sensitive of pastoral situations. In other words, he is all in. His service to the diocese, to the province, to the national church but most importantly to God is a great and complete gift. And he is a tremendous blessing to me personally.

And lastly, I thank God for all of you constantly. Your service, your commitment, and your presence as the Church is what it's all about. To our clergy, I see you – I see your gifts and your heart and dedication to God and to your people. You truly fulfil Jesus's commands to love God and love your neighbour. In these trying and exhausting times, please know that we all see your sacrifices – your joys and your sorrows. You are beloved.

And now, in the midst of trying times, with hearts full of faith in the One who calls to be One in Christ, to God be the glory.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.