



**The Bishop's Charge
to the 150th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
by The Right Reverend Dr. Susan J.A. Bell**

Saturday, November 2, 2024

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

Dear members of Synod, dear people of God: how can we have faith in the future?

We live bravely in a time of uncertainty and courageously in a time of discontinuous change – a time when we're experiencing unpredictable shifts in our culture. And when issues like political unpredictability, climate crisis, or cost of living crisis, to name a few, are ever before us, what does it mean to have faith in the future?

Well, I think it requires this of us: to lift our heads from our concerns and look to the promises of God.

Because God wants the best for us. I know that because it's right here in black and white in our family story; listen to this:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD.”

Of course, God is speaking in the first instance through the prophet to a people who had undergone a great hardship. The people of Israel had been conquered by ruthless Babylon and were in exile – strangers in a strange land – undergoing financial and cultural hardship and were deeply discouraged. And Jeremiah speaks these gentle and encouraging words into that context.

The scriptures show us that God's heart has always been, from Genesis to Revelation, for us. It has always been oriented toward loving us, to wanting the best for us - God's children - to desiring to draw us to God and to each other in love and unity.

Scripture is among many things, the record of how God keeps God's promises despite the best this world and we can do avoid that love and break covenant with the Lord.

So, in order to have faith in the future we need to double down on what we know about God – that it is the character of God: to give, to be found, to plan good for us, to love us.

And it is the same character of communities formed in the image of this love too.

And we hear something similar in our Synod's Gospel: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”

As we are formed to become more and more like Christ over our lifetimes, we know that Christian community offers an alternative – even a rebuke - to the uncertainty and dehumanization we face in our culture. It is a place – at its best – where the love of God is our face to the world.

It is for this reason that we need to keep our eyes focused on Christ (as Hebrews 12 says) because Jesus is our template for how to be fully human in this world.

God wants the best for us.

And hasn't that been our experience over the years of Covid and since?

We have experienced God's plan for us for good and not for harm. After a period of hardship and uncertainty, we have felt the good come upon us – gently and imperceptibly at first - and then palpably at last. We have asked, knocked and sought God - and we have received as a diocese.

You know, I have an old friend who often says that if you want to see the arc of progress sometimes you need to look backward – he says it's like going to the back of a big ship like the Queen Mary and looking at the wake – the pattern of the waves – and you can see that gradually you're turning but the ship is so big that the turn felt almost imperceptible. And yet the wake is there.

The reality is, progress has been made.

Well friends, progress has been made across our diocese too. Perhaps not evenly, and I understand the problems that were present before the pandemic are often still present – perhaps made even more acute by a slow recovery. But that means more than ever we need to keep our eyes focused on Christ and be listening for the wisdom of the Spirit in these times.

But there has still been progress. There is still a wake to celebrate.

Did you know that Easter attendance across the diocese was up 20% year over year? And did you know that Christmas attendance was up 50% year over year? And did you know that our Diocesan Mission and Ministry contributions are trending along the most positive forecast? The stats don't lie.

Even if this is "just" folks returning after the pandemic – that is not to be taken lightly because there are plenty of places where folks aren't returning at all.

But I have to tell you that I think it is more than that. Anecdotally, across the diocese I am hearing about and seeing a lot of new people in our pews. In particular, I am tremendously proud of the way our parishes and missions have welcomed newcomers to our country and to our churches. I have had some wonderful experiences meeting them and hearing their stories on my travels. And what I have heard most often is their deep gratitude for the way they feel loved by our welcome.

Well done Niagara – whether it's at St. John's, Stamford, or Holy Trinity Welland or St. James', Dundas, St. John's, Hamilton, All Saints Mission, or St. Paul's, Westdale – and many other places too, well done. You have seen the face of Christ in your siblings and extended a welcome to angels.

So, let us stay the course.

What else can we notice and celebrate? Well, how about the fact that we have come to year 5 with our diocesan Mission Action Plan – and boy, have we worked it! We have been faithful to what we discerned was our work over these past five years.

But there's one place where I know we haven't achieved our full potential and that is in the area of faith formation. For that reason, and because it is so important, foundational even, we have made provision in the budget for an experienced person to be a diocesan resource for faith formation. The position is half time for now, and so important do I believe it to be to our overall diocesan spiritual health, that it is my hope that it will become a full-time position in time.

Just on the MAP in general: what I hear over and over again, is the impact that the planning process has had on parish life. Intentional discernment about where God is calling the family of faith is yielding results. We are truly called to life and compelled to love! I have felt the surge in energy in parishioners; I have seen the excitement about ministry again. All of this is exciting because it works. There's the wake: it works. Dr. Emily Hill will update us on the progress and planning for a MAP 2.0 for the diocese a little later in Synod. And she's also done yeoman duty in midwifing MAP 2.0 for parishes.

You know another friend of mine – a successful businessman and coach - really endorses planning in his secular work as well as in the church. But he says, and this is interesting – the plan is not really the thing – it’s what he calls the strategic by-products of the plan that are the real bonus. It’s the side streets the MAP guides us down and the people and opportunities for relationship and mission that we find in addition to what we plan for that are the real gift of mission action planning. I think we can call that the intervention and leading of the Holy Spirit and it’s a tremendous blessing.

I hope you keep that in mind as you do the work of revising your MAPs. I pray God’s blessing on you in that work and pray that you will make it a habit of faith to plan in this way over and again.

It’s another way that we love God and love the world that God loves so much.

Okay, what else can we notice?

So, this is what I observe around the diocese: when we held our regional town halls, I heard a great deal of anxiety around resources and about voluntarism. And in retrospect, it’s not surprising. At that time, we were on the cusp of recovery post-Covid, but we hadn’t yet leaned into it in the way we are now. As a result, what I heard was a rhetoric of scarcity and worry. I listened to that and we – altogether – all of us – decided not to proceed with the diocesan capital campaign even though most of the resources raised would have stayed in the parish. But it was just too early in our recovery cycle.

Now what I’ve observed in the months since, is the growing number of stewardship campaigns in the parish. So that tells me that our campaign discernment has borne fruit of a different kind than I’d anticipated - but that’s the Holy Spirit for you! She blows where she will! And that’s something to celebrate - a wonderful, if unintentional consequence of discernment from the capital campaign.

It’s truly great news that you feel sufficiently confident to think about local ministry and mission again. It’s great that many of you are also able to plan for capital improvements to our buildings – our containers for that ministry – and that some of you are even building for future mission as in Elora where St. John's has consulted the community on how they’ll share their new connective ministry space. Or St. George's St. Catharines undertaking major exterior repairs and renovations to sustain the amazing work they do inside their building. Or like its neighbour St. Barnabas St. Catharines renovating their space for additional offices and meeting spaces, . . . so many wonderful dreams for our future ministry are becoming a reality across our diocese.

We may just come at some of our hopes by another route – God works like that, right? Take the Curacy Fund. Many of you have invested a little in that dream by buying a ticket for this evening’s 150th anniversary dinner – and I thank you for that generosity.

The proceeds will be contributed to an endowment with our diocesan foundation that will make it possible long into the future for us to provide appropriate training for newly ordained clergy.

We will keep building that fund all through this anniversary year - and beyond - because it is something that truly benefits the whole diocese. When your parish needs a new priest, with your help, I'll be able much more easily to provide one who is formed and supported by the donations of many; that's our Anglican Church at its best!

So now I want to talk to you about leadership. You and I know that good, creative, skilled, stable clergy leadership equals (all things remaining the same) a healthy, creative, non-anxious parish family. One that is willing and able to become a mixed ecology church where traditional ministry happens but also new, creative, mission-focused ministry. One that is able to meet the challenges of today and to live with confidence into tomorrow.

Where does this kind of leadership come from?

Well, the Niagara School for Missional Leadership for one. It's another strategic by-product of our MAP. It has become an incubator for diocesan leadership – lay and ordained. Now this is your school – not someone else's – it's there for your education and interest. I am so very pleased to say that we have partnered with Huron College to offer courses to their students as well. This was a wonderful affirmation of all the hard work that has happened over the last four years to establish and then refine the work of the school. The offerings are for everyone – this is for lay people as much as those who are in ministry training. I want to thank Sarah Bird and Dr. Emily Hill for their hard work supporting and maintaining the school, alongside our whole diocesan staff team. Niagara, you can be proud of this work. That's a wake to notice and celebrate for sure.

Continuing on in this theme: I am also the ACPO bishop for the national and provincial church. ACPO - or the Anglican Committee on Postulants for Ordination - is where potential candidates for the priesthood are interviewed by some very talented assessors for their fitness for mission and ministry today. I see what is needed across the province, and national church. By the way, our very own Canon Mathew Griffin is the ACPO secretary for the province and does a very fine job of it indeed.

Over the last three years I have also chaired the provincial vocations conference. Our very own Archbishop Colin Johnson has been the facilitator of the conference as well. A bunch of us got together about 10 years ago to try and figure out why we are experiencing a shortage of clergy. The problem is not a new one and it's been brewing for a generation. It is affecting us across the country in the large centres and in the smaller, rural areas.

Something interesting happened at the end of the three years that we devoted to examining what was going right and wrong in the search for candidates for ordained ministry. I'll summarize our findings – this is a very basic summary, you understand – but is a crucial finding. It amounts to this: the church is not doing her part in raising up candidates for the priesthood.

It's not that they aren't there – they are. But we've stopped encouraging vocations from among us. We could posit lots of ideas as to why, but let's just say that the issue is complex. But let me ask you this: when was the last time you spoke to a talented young person and asked them if they might consider a vocation as a deacon or priest in the Church? Because it's everyone's job to encourage vocations. And then let me ask you this: have you ever spoken to one of your children or your grandchildren about a vocation? Answer to yourself – now, why? Or, why not? Something to think about. Something to pray about. Something to take action about.

Which is all to say, we have very few vocations from the midst of us and we need many more. There's a good and rigorous process: discernment; education and formation; there's a curacy and there's lifelong learning in their vocation. It's all there.

And I'm telling you, there's no life like it. Ask any clergyperson going about their vocation joyfully – there's no life like it.

So, we're consciously recruiting priests to serve in the church of God. You may have noticed that I ordained 5 fine priests and received one more fine priest a few weeks ago so our numbers are slowly increasing. But we need many more.

Added to a general shortage, we are experiencing a generational shift as well. In September, it got so I didn't want to answer the phone anymore, so many retirements did I accept! It's all good and natural and I am enormously grateful to all our long-serving and faithful clergy who have retired – many of whom still serve in interim ministry for us. We literally couldn't minister across the diocese without your help, so thank you.

Now, back to that 150th Anniversary Curacy Fund. When I ordain a transitional deacon, they then spend two years in a kind of apprenticeship with another skilled priest. They learn how to be a competent and hopefully creative priest. That's a tall order; there's lots to learn about becoming mixed ecology parishes.

Like the fact that healthy parishes do both new and old things. That might be reaching out to those who do not yet know the name of Jesus with conversation or working at side-by-side justice ministries that demonstrate the love of God in community. And those things are held alongside more traditional outreach and Christian education ministries.

So transitional deacons learn in this kind of environment in different parishes all across the diocese. The thing is; they need experience in all kinds of parishes – rural and urban – big and small.

Currently, I'm in a bit of a bind: I am unable to place curates in smaller parishes that may not be able to bear the whole cost of an additional stipend. That means that curates are denied the experience they might gain there. That is a problem because the vast majority of our parishes are in smaller communities. And by not giving our curates experience in these places, we are just not setting folks up for success.

But with a curacy fund that is endowed long into the future, it then becomes possible to place new clergy into formational situations that will build competencies in a number of contexts. We can then work in partnership with parishes to become places of education and formation that benefit everyone. That is good for our new clergy and good for the Church.

And there are those who have caught this vision. I am deeply humbled by a legacy gift already of a quarter of a million dollars toward this new Curacy Fund made in our anniversary year. I am profoundly grateful to the donors for their trust and for their vision. That is faith in the future. And I am in receipt of more gifts from folks who understand the importance of this legacy fund. It'll be here long after we're all gone to ensure that parishes receive the best formed priests we can muster.

Now there's a special person among us whose role and joy it is to work with folks who would like to leave a legacy gift to support the church. His name is The Rev'd Canon Dr. Drew MacDonald and he would be pleased to speak with any of you about stewardship or the ways in which our Foundation can multiply any gift you would like to give.

Again, I thank those who have already contributed to this vision, and I pray that there are others here today whose hearts may be moved to have faith in the future too and to decide to support the leadership of all the parishes in our diocese in this way as an outworking of the Great Commandment. If you want to make a gift, there is a special QR code or page on our website that will direct you to a place where you can do that.

Love God and love the world that God loves so much.

Speaking of love in action, as you know, it's been my habit to recognize just a few ordained leaders each year for their extraordinary service to the diocese and make them canons of our cathedral in conjunction with Dean Tim Dobbin.

This year, in recognition of our 150th anniversary and in recognition of the many who have served above and beyond for the diocese there are a few more canons to be named. So, without further ado, and would you each please

stand and remain standing as your name is called, I am pleased to name the following as honorary canons of Christ's Church Cathedral:
Garfield Wu, Ellie Clitheroe, Malcolm French, Naomi Kabugi and Tom Vaughan

Many congratulations to you all on behalf of Dean Tim and myself.

I need hardly say that these are folks who have distinguished themselves by trying hard, by going above and beyond in joining God's mission in Smithville, Oakville, Hamilton, and St. Catharines – all over our beloved diocese.

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Let me end my charge for 2024 with a personal reflection. As you know, back in June, I went on sabbatical. Sabbath leaves are important inflection points in the exercise of ministry; times to check in with God and with self to make sure that we are listening to the Spirit's leading. I am grateful to you for the time away and grateful to our Church for its provision.

I had a lot of wonderful things planned for this time of spiritual refreshment – an Ignatian retreat in Northern Wales, some time spent at the British Library working on some academic things. Visits to friends and colleagues. Quiet, prayer time. And the centrepiece was our eldest daughter's wedding in Scotland.

Sadly, I had to cancel almost all of it. My health was not great. I'd been working too hard (because I love it) and my body literally went on strike. So, I had to channel all of my energy toward getting well for the wedding – which I did. And the wedding was a beautiful blessing.

But this personal crisis caused me to reflect deeply on a number of things. That was another blessing of this time. A good friend reminded me that sometimes you go someplace to have a retreat, and sometimes you retreat in place. That's what I did.

And so, it made me think. And my overwhelming feeling in those days and nights deep in prayer, was gratitude.

You know, nobody performs their vocation alone – and that is particularly the case in the office of the bishop. I am surrounded by very smart, very capable people who help me administer the diocese and care for all of you. They love their vocations as do I and are committed to you all. I am constantly amazed by what they manage to do as we are not a large diocesan staff. And if I have felt that gratitude in normative times, I have felt it doubly in these last months when I was incapacitated and had to have a profound rest.

So, I want to thank these folks and name them to you.

First, Archbishop Colin Johnson who was my commissary while I was away. You all know that the archbishop is a gift to the church, the whole church, and not just to us. Archbishop, I am grateful to you for your care for all of us but most of all, for your friendship.

Archdeacon Bill Mous. Now every year I say to you how much I appreciate Bill's gifts. And it's true, I do, deeply. But this year again, I knew that between him and the archbishop, our dean and Jane, you were all in the best of hands. Thank you, Bill, for your tremendous abilities, but most of all for your love of our diocese and church. And bless you, my comrade-in-arms.

Jane Wyse. Jane, your price is above rubies. I just can't imagine doing this without your support – of every kind. And as you all know, Jane combines this deep competence with a heart just as genuine. Jane thank you for everything.

Dean Tim – Niagara, we have in Tim a gentle, self-effacing, talented rector and dean. The cathedral is literally hopping these days with vital mission and there's a sense of holy urgency about the contextual ministry it has embraced. And that comes from somewhere – from fine, committed, prescient leadership. Thank you for all the ways you support me and our diocese Tim.

And to Canon Ian and Emily, our diocesan missionaries. You have changed us for the better this year and I know we're only getting started. Thank you for bringing all your experience and expertise to bear on our beloved diocese.

And my deep thanks to Hannah, Shannon and Drew; Dani, Sarah and Deirdre; Christine, Kim, Abiola, and Laurie; and Lorna, Turner and Derek for all that you do as a staff team, in service of our diocese.

So, members of Synod, you can hear that you were in good hands in my absence. It literally takes a village to support a diocese and pray and work for its thriving.

I am also thankful for each one of you – and of the folks you represent. Thank you for your partnership in the Gospel, for the love and the respect and most especially the trust you offer me year in, year out. Together, we are listening for the Spirit's leading – together, we are responding with faith, hope, and love.

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One last thing: as I embarked on my sabbatical, somehow, I thought that maybe with time and stillness, it was possible that I might return to you having heard something new from God - a new plan – that some vision might descend from on high that was different from what we were currently doing. It makes me smile now to think about that.

It didn't. At least not entirely. What did keep coming to me in the midst of all the work to convalesce is that what we had to do was to keep our eyes focused on Christ - and if we did that, the rest would come right. That's why I chose the Hebrews passage we read a little earlier.

And I believe that to be profoundly true. If Jesus is the centre, and that centre holds, against all the uncertainty and challenge of our times, if we look to the ways that we know that God always keeps God's promises, if we seek God with our whole hearts, and if we count on the love we find in our seeking and on each other, then that is the gift we offer to our world: to be that loving, incarnational presence.

This I know for sure: it is the antidote to the loneliness, the anxiety, the polarization, and the dehumanization of our times.

So, members of Synod, my essential - irreducible charge to you and to the faithful across our beloved diocese is this: keep your eyes firmly focused on Christ. Stay the course. Love God and love the world that God loves so much.

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