

Bishop Ian's Charge to Diocesan Synod, 6 March 2021

This has been a very hard year. Almost immediately following our last Synod the Pandemic struck, our churches were closed, our world was in lockdown, and fear and worry were all around. Since then, the months have gone by, with all their attendant uncertainty and loss, loss both of life and of livelihood. The vaccine gives us all reason to hope, but we know that until everyone is vaccinated, nobody is vaccinated. So when your turn comes, please make that appointment.

The year has been deeply stressful and exhausting – the increase in workload, the financial strain, the need to adapt, the online and on-paper worship, the pastoral care at a distance, the loss of familiar patterns, the loss of employment, and too often the loss of loved ones – all caused by the Pandemic, and all of it very hard to bear. The year has demanded that we dig deeper into our faith to find inner resources and spiritual strengths.

We will continue to do our very best to support all our clergy and congregations through this time as it continues. But afterwards things will inevitably be different. We don't yet know how, because nobody does. But we know that this time will change us as a Church in good ways and less good ways. Crisis is an accelerator of change – and this crisis will speed up many changes that were already happening, including some that have been much needed.

Someone said, a year ago, "Wouldn't it be good if people said at the end of this time, 'We couldn't have got through it without the Church?'" I hope that could already be said of us, but there is still time to make sure it will be said.

Those are the first and most important things I want to say today as your Bishop. I say them confidently because of your commitment to the work of Christ in each congregation and community, your resourcefulness, and emerging skills, the gifted leadership of our clergy and vestries, and the self-giving service of our Diocesan staff and volunteers.

This is a challenging time to lead and serve, and I ask you to care for our clergy and lay readers, and to be gracious while they cope with change and stress - because ministry in this time is exhausting. We should be gentle in our expectations, because it's at times like this that the fruits of the Spirit are really needed: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

When the Pandemic is over, do we really want to return to business as usual? After all, business as usual means loneliness, homelessness, mental illness, unemployment, domestic abuse, inequality and privilege, and environmental destruction. It means offering NHS staff just 1% as thanks for their service, and cutting aid to struggling countries by 50%. As Archbishop Stephen Cottrell said this week, "Our [moral] compass has slipped; we've allowed ourselves to believe that things can't change, that this is just the way the world is."

In such a world - a world that needs to change - the Jesus who has sought us out will send us out, to live not for ourselves but for others. To do that we will have to be willing to change

ourselves if we want to call others to change. The world facing so many challenges needs a Church that is humbler, simpler, more generous, more hopeful, and more loving. This is God's Church and God is leading us through the Pandemic to be something new and beautifully different and yet at its heart, the same.

In our pared-down online Synod we are discussing several things which are focus our attention on our post-Covid calling as God's Church serving God's world:

- **Diocesan Finance:** our budget is trying to be responsive to the needs of the future. And although it is a deficit budget, it is a sign of our mutual commitment of congregations to support each other. This is the time for elder sisters and brothers and prodigal daughters and sons to share the fatted calf provided by their rejoicing mother or father (*the Gospel at the Synod Eucharist was the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15.11-32*).
- **Lent Appeal:** in this year's Lent Appeal we can all contribute to 2 projects: *Start Up Stirling*, and *Angus Creative Minds*, both described in the leaflet. These are local projects, maybe distant from you, but I hope that in Lent we raise our eyes and 'extend our hands' beyond our own area, to support a local charity elsewhere.
- **Season of Pilgrimage:** a pilgrimage is a journey of faith, of trust, not of certainty. It is a risky stepping forward with God. As we travel through and beyond the Pandemic, we are on such a journey, personally and together, and the Season will offer opportunities to learn more about being people who travel in faith.
- **Canon 4:** in the SEC we elect our bishops, and the way we do this shows what kind of church we are and what kind of ministry a bishop is called to. The Consultation on revising Canon 4 (which governs the process of election) is just that, a consultation. But there are different ways the Canon could be revised, if we decide as a church to do that. Our discussion today will help us understand the options, so that we can involve our Vestries and Congregations. That, too, is a sign of the kind of church we are.
- **Young People:** our newly established Young People's Committee is there to encourage children and young people and those who support them in the Diocese. They are not the Church of tomorrow, but the Church of today, aged 1 day or 18 years they are already our brothers and sisters, and are already on the same challenging pilgrimage of faith as the rest of us. They also have things to say about it, and we will hear from them today.
- **Climate Crisis:** one of the priorities that young people have for the Church is one shared by many others. In December our General Synod committed the SEC not merely to pass resolutions but to take practical steps, over the next decade, that will address this urgent crisis for our planet and all its inhabitants. We've read the journalism, we've seen the science, we've listened to David Attenborough. Now it's time to take action.

I have now been serving as your Bishop for two and a half years, and have grown to love the people, the clergy and congregations, the communities and the landscape of this diverse and distinctive Diocese. Every day I thank God for calling me to serve you here, even as I ask him to show me how to do it better! I thank you for all that you are and all that you want to become, and pray that, by God's grace, and together, we will be what God would have us be.

