**ARCHDEACONRY CONSULTATIONS ON DIOCESAN STRATEGY AND FINANCE, September 2020**

I want to be clear and direct with you, as I speak about the journey forward for us in the Diocese of Portsmouth. Over the last six months each of us has faced lockdown and restrictions, our churches have had to close before limited reopening, and we still anticipate some months of uncertainty. We have witnessed death and suffering, been reminded of our fragility and mortality, experienced both courageous selfless ministry, and human as well as technological creativity. You have held the faith, finding in Jesus Christ consolation and strength for the moment and hope for the future. The Christian hope is certain, and it has been proclaimed with resilience across our parishes and chaplaincies in the communities of the diocese. Our hope is in God and we meet today to consider how, looking ahead, we renew ourselves in changed circumstances to be the Christian church, the community of hope in the coming years.

I am glad to speak to you of my vision for us as people of hope without skirting the realities we face. I want you to hear from me directly my intentions and my motivation. However much has changed this year, and however hard parish and diocesan life and finances have been affected, our vocation as the people of God, to be disciples of Jesus Christ, to be the Body of Christ, to be the church for others, has not changed.

The present circumstances – and, yes, they are challenging – compel us to ask what the Christian community in parishes and benefices needs to thrive. Thriving is to grow and, as we say in Portsmouth, to grow in depth, impact and number. That is our vision and our purpose, and it must always come first. It precedes strong strategies and new proposals, much as we need them, but my priority is to enable each of us to live that vision and fulfil that purpose in God’s love, in the name of Jesus, and in the power of the Spirit.

The pandemic lockdown and the continuing period of restrictions means that our parish income has declined. We have been confronted, in most if not all places, by the vulnerability of our income and our dependence on various charitable, letting or business income streams, or investments reflecting past generations’ generosity, but less often on our own sacrificial generosity. I acknowledge with gratitude those of you as individuals or parishes who have used personal or parish reserves set aside or designated for a longed-for purpose or project – as the diocese has done as well - so that our shared responsibility can be honoured to those who look to the diocese for their salary and stipend, our parish clergy and our lay colleagues. On behalf of them and their families, thank you very much indeed. Parish income paid through the Share system is by far the bulk of the income of the diocese that meets those outgoings which are the main element of our budget.

We must be a church in this diocese which welcomes that mutuality. That’s why I recoil from the language of levels, when we speak of sending something down to the parishes or up to the diocese, or even further up to the national church institutions. We are neither a top-down, nor a bottom-up, organisation or institution. We are the Church. I cannot begin to get anywhere near fulfilling my calling and responsibility without you; and you cannot live out yours without me and the diocese.

The role of the Diocese is to enable and resource the church, principally through people, in its ministry and mission across the communities we serve. I believe in the parish system and structure of the Church of England, but not for what it is, so that it must be defended and preserved as it is now as if a heritage asset. I believe in the parish structure of our Church because of its purpose; to serve every person of this nation, every child, woman and man, by proclaiming Jesus to them in witness, service and outreach, sharing with them the hope we hold in our hearts. That is and remains our vocation, our calling, our mission, our job.

For that work we will now have less resource, or specifically we will have less money and fewer people on stipends and salaries, but we are the same people with the same faith and calling into ministries lay and ordained and that resource will not be smaller, and with God’s grace and blessing it and we will indeed grow.

We shall have to change. Like the parishes the Diocese is using its liquid available reserves and has redesignated some to reduce our growing deficit. We have taken out a loan facility of £2m – one of the most unexpected and worrying moments of my ministry – but we hope cautiously that our end of year shortfall may be closer to £1m. We shall enter next year, like most parishes, with reduced income and smaller reserves, but also with a large loan to pay off and, despite reducing all possible spending lines, with more stipends and salaries to meet than we can continue to sustain.

Bishop’s Council has agreed with me and my closest colleagues, deciding that the wrong way to address this is just to engage in a cost-cutting exercise and spread a reduced number of staff and clergy more thinly than before across the diocese. We are inviting the central church, through advice and support and hopefully transition funding as well, to help us in reimagining our structures and transforming us for renewal in mission and ministry. There will be change as we cannot sustain the present arrangements. We intend to complete planning this autumn, and begin the lengthy journey of implementation next year, consulting widely using a new framework of deanery consultation agreed by Bishop’s Council. I and the Bishop’s Council bear the responsibility to structure and provide for sustaining and developing the mission of the Gospel here. We can only resource that in a partnership across the whole diocese.

I do not pretend this will always be easy or comfortable. But I am determined that, though we must spend less as income has dropped, we will use all we have with a vision for the growth of the church, so that the good news of Jesus is shared, and we play our part in building the Kingdom into which God calls everyone. We are not a business which needs to cut its costs. We are Christ’s Church, understanding our purpose and intent on using our God-belonging resources wisely and fruitfully.

Even with less money we are, by most standards, rich individually and collectively in our parishes and diocese. In God’s economy He gives us enough for the ministry He entrusts to us. For remember that with Jesus five loaves and two fish were enough to feed thousands, and through one single person’s life, death and resurrection came salvation for everyone. Our vision and purpose, as well as our hope, must reflect those truths as well as be inspired by them.

There is a stridency in our national discourse at the moment and I detect too a growing mistrust.

Where six months ago we found a unity and solidarity, exemplified in clapping for carers and our concern for our shielding neighbours and those sleeping rough, our generosity in running and supporting foodbanks, and other thoughtfulness, now we are increasingly hearing a stridency and a bitterness. We are tending towards fearfulness, sometimes hostility of others, and perhaps that is not surprising where we must treat other people with caution, keeping them at a distance, speaking through a face covering, regarding them a threat to our own health as a potential carrier of a sometimes deadly virus. While that must be so physically for now, Christians of all people cannot, must not slip into a mindset which mirrors this in our attitude and our outlook.

We are people who want to speak and to be the good news of Jesus. At a time when the latest government initiative is invariably hailed as ground-breaking or world beating, we carry something which is truly world changing; news of a relationship which transforms a person, our community and our everything. We are Christians who wish to be Christ-centred and Jesus-shaped, and the church we are must too be Christ-centred and Jesus-shaped. We will be a bit poorer, and we must be humble and merciful, righteous but not self-righteous, and love as Jesus loves us.

We are the church not just because we want to be together with Jesus and with each other but also because we want to be Christ for others and for the world. Our shape and structure as a church will need to change more than any of us have ever known. But our vision, intention and purpose remain the same; to be Christ’s Church for everyone and to be that in faithfulness and love for Jesus and for all the people of our communities.

*Bishop Christopher*

*September 2020*