**DIOCESAN SYNOD, June 2020**

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

How often in the last three months have we told each other and ourselves that these are challenging times, that we are in an unprecedented situation, or that these circumstances are unique? That sort of language has been mine, and probably yours too. It opens the way for all sorts of unprecedented (there I go again!) actions, approaches and not infrequently the self-indulgence of considerable special pleading as people and organisations seek some sort of particular treatment or facility or exception.

This morning I am going unashamedly to avail myself of that provision, confessing that its use by others has sometimes annoyed me. I would have preferred in this address to reflect with you on the impact of the pandemic on our society and world spiritually, economically and collectively, or on the God-given dignity of every human person in the wake of George Floyd’s brutal death, or the growing tension over land and rights in Israel-Palestine.

However this unique Synod, which I and the Vice Presidents were determined would meet even if it had to be virtually and without legal status, and where virtual participation can be daunting, therefore persuades me to take a more limited approach this morning and try to set in context the update (coming later on the agenda) and our shared consideration of the possible future.

I want to offer, first, my fulsome gratitude to those in our parishes and our chaplaincies who have given so much and so generously during the pandemic. Church buildings may have closed but the time, energy and hard work, skill and experience, flexibility and innovation have been striking. The Church of England has not been closed for ministry and mission. Especially this has been demonstrated by lay church officers, chaplains (not least in our hospitals and hospices), Readers and clergy. Of course I have seen that most in those with whom I am working most closely; the archdeacons, the Diocesan Secretary, the Communications Officer, the Dean and the deputy Diocesan Secretary. Not a day has passed in three months without contact and conversation with them.

We are determined to be a generous, compassionate and faith-full Church. So, in this diocese we waived fees for all funerals at crematoria and graveside, and gave funeral directors a single contact phone number to ensure that anyone who asked us for a Christian funeral immediately had it confirmed even if the immediately local minister wasn’t available. That has been a conspicuous success and I am particularly grateful to the relatively few clergy who took a substantial number of funerals when others weren’t available for a variety of reasons. In parishes food banks and support for increasing numbers in poverty have been outstanding; parishes have sometimes funded as well as delivered food packs for children at home missing free school meals; lay and ordained ministers have been alert sensitively on the phone or video to those vulnerable to violence or abuse as well as to illness, need or through age.

We have been and are God’s church proclaiming Jesus Christ and the good news of the Kingdom in word and in action. Living, Praying and Serving.

But you will know from the papers for this Synod that we must be ready to change our way of doing that in the future, just as we have changed our witness, service and worship over the last three months. As I have already said to the clergy, we face shortly the challenge of serving three congregations; some who will be able to worship, pray and be nourished in faith in restricted numbers in our church buildings, some who must or choose to worship, pray and be nourished at home via the internet, and some who must be at home and wish to worship, pray and be nourished but cannot engage virtually. And, though pastoral care for and nurture of each other is important, the church of God is apostolic and sent out in mission and evangelism. We are still called to Grow, in Depth, Impact and Number.

We must re-shape ourselves, as a diocese, through our deaneries, and in parishes, to do that under severe financial challenge. Even if income levels were to return to 2020 levels by late 2021 or whenever, we are already facing now an anticipated debt in excess of £2m by the end of this year. The update paper outlines the scale of the challenge that Bishop’s Council, first, and then you must address. The Council bears my name but is largely elected by you, the lay and ordained people of the Diocese and Synod. It is your Council as much as mine and it now faces some hard decisions.

This Diocese has, for at least the last decade about which I can speak, neither been forced nor chosen to reduce overall its salary and stipend costs to lead and sustain mission and ministry in parishes, but has maintained or increased its commitment to engagement and mission in parishes, schools, pioneering, planting, and supported that through social enterprise, vocation development, safeguarding, property improvement and the range of ways of which you are aware. On present expectations we anticipate our present staffing and spending will exceed our anticipated income after lockdown by at least 20%.

What can we do while we explore the right way forward which is both realistic, and also missional and pastoral? While these past weeks have been appallingly tragic for some, and also demeaningly thrown some into poverty and despair, while others face the frightening prospect of moving from furlough to unemployment, some by contrast have found that no commuting or travel or holidays or luxury shopping has left them better off. In some parishes people have already made special donations and gifts. In these rainy days – and we have not known any worse as yesterday’s economic figures show - the free reserves or excess income we hold in parishes, in the diocese, and individually can help us reduce our exposure to loans, stabilise our finances, and so reset our mission, outreach and service for the future. Your parish needs the generosity you can show, and we all need the parishes to use the reserves they hold for tough times, if we are together to mitigate the immediate financial impact of the pandemic and to be effective in mission and service beyond this crisis.

God’s church, proclaiming Jesus and the Kingdom, was not closed for the pandemic. Our vocation is for it to be fully open and engaged for the greater challenges and opportunities that now follow.

*Bishop Christopher, 13 June 2020*