

Bishop's Charge

Synod of the Diocese of Athabasca, October 2010

I begin this evening with a word of thanks to all of you. I am so appreciative of the prayers for me and my family, especially as I still feel I'm in early days of this new ministry. We have experienced your support and have been very blessed in moving to a new community, new town and in such change. Every visit and meeting I have experienced in these last nine and a half months has been a taste of that again. I also want to express my thanks to my secretary Donna Meeres, who is also our administrator and financial officer – big jobs, all. Thank you, too, to our Executive Archdeacon, Daryle Kerr. They have been good supports and guides in this time of transition and steep learning curves. They have coped amazingly well with adjusting to all the changes and upheaval I bring, too. The Dean, Iain Luke, has been a blessing to me and to our family, giving support, counsel and ministry to us. The leadership of the diocese – DEC and Management Committee – have also done that job with devotion and commitment.

I also want to take a moment to thank Archbishop Clarke for the support and wisdom he has continued to offer to me personally, and to our family. The diocese also owes him thanks for his leadership to us, and in keeping us on such a good path. For some time we have held before ourselves the commitment, established under his leadership, to be self-financing, self-evangelising and self-governing. The Archbishop helped us to see that we needed to lose any sense that someone else should take care of us and that we are able, and need, to be responsible for our own call and mission. We have already seen the good fruit of this in several ways. One of these has been to take seriously the responsibility for paying our own way. As the national church, and thus the Council of the North, faces dramatic financial difficulties, we have already made adjustments that will help weather the transition on our way to the place of receiving no Council Grant. The progress we've made in this direction has come as a result of the commitment of the diocesan leadership and that of the parishes. At times it has meant doing without some things, and has come only by your sacrifice and commitment. It is critical that we continue this triumvirate as we look toward where we are going, and build on the success we've already experienced. These sacrifices are not made simply in order to exist. As we consider this weekend and the decisions we will face, we need to keep our eyes on our real purpose.

The Diocese of Athabasca is here to accomplish something intrinsic to God's plan of salvation: the evangelisation of the whole of Northern Alberta. This is our purpose and our goal, including both lapsed (those who consider themselves Anglican but do not participate in the life of the community) and, primarily, those who do not yet know the Lord. It is not just to the places where we are now, but to every town, city, village, area and person, and that will require new ministries and missions. God loves every single person living within our borders, and, in fact, went to the cross for them. He asks us to take His kingdom to all in order that they will also know His love. This concept is hardly new to us. Our heritage as a diocese is that of missionaries, the establishment of missions and churches and giving our lives in order to tell people about Jesus. We will not allow the difficulties facing the national church, the communion, and, sometimes, our own congregations to divert us.

At the heart of this call is nothing short of what may feel like a radical new vision of existence. We cannot conceive of ourselves as a family of connected parishes, but instead of one body distributed strategically across this field of the Lord to effect the Kingdom of God so that people hear and receive the gospel and have their lives transformed. We cannot afford to think in terms of defending our turf. Rather, we share together in this exciting call to mission across the whole diocese.

In order for this to not turn into mere words or "churchy lingo" we need to be intentional and to have a plan to accomplish this. We've already turned toward this call in taking responsibility for ourselves. As we take the next steps it is important to recall the very real truth of how this works – we partner with our risen Lord Who is able to do more than we can ask or imagine. He is not asking us to do this in our own strength or wisdom, but to do it in the power of the Holy Spirit and according to His direction. The whole point and chief-cornerstone of this is the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. We need to recall that Anglicanism has something exciting to offer the world and take courage and strength in it. I suspect we need to recover/relearn what that is. At the beginning of the year I had the privilege of attending a conference for new bishops in Canterbury. There were bishops there from around the world and we met daily in Canterbury Cathedral among the reminders of nearly 15 centuries of continuous ministry and worship. I was overwhelmed by the sense of the international and timeless church, stretching back to

the first apostles and Jesus himself. This is our experience and heritage. For the service of the gospel, God has gifted us with apostolicity, family, charismatic/liturgical/catholic/evangelical spirituality, sacraments, and “borders” to keep us in the right path.

We will only flourish, survive even, when we are devoted to this mission and organizing everything we do around it. This is not only possible, it is something we see glimpses of already. We need to be intentional and practical in living it out. I believe there are some very concrete steps we can, and must, take to make this the everyday reality of the Anglican church in Northern Alberta. Our vision is not merely “survival”, but of success and growth. It begins with our own changed hearts and sense of purpose:

1. Preparation and Equipping – In some senses this is what we have already been doing. The conferences we’ve held, even the speakers at this synod, are all a part of setting the stage. This is really about two things: education and relationship. The education part means putting into place some intentional things so we know what we believe, why we believe it and are able to live it. Certainly this means effective bible studies, prayer groups, Sunday School and the like. Just importantly, we need to know our communities and their needs, and the gifts God has given us that connect with them. In this “getting ready” phase, there are three things to do: to prayerfully assess the community and the congregation, to understand our faith, and to be filled with God’s grace. To this end, I would ask congregations to come up with the answer to the question as to why they exist where they are. What has God in mind? Secondly, I would recommend re-establishing the understanding of our faith, and especially to consider confirmation classes. While we certainly want young people, I am thinking particularly of adults (even those already confirmed who may want or need a “refresher”). This should be well thought out and presented. At the end of the day, each participant should have an understanding not only of our faith, but also of how to live as a disciple. Those not yet confirmed would receive the laying on of hands to receive the grace and infilling of the Spirit to live this out. Those who have already been confirmed have the opportunity to recommit their lives to Him. A third thing is to consider a parish mission. We all need to go on being filled with the grace of God and to be encouraged. These provide a focussed opportunity for the local community to have someone come and teach and minister to, and with, them and to pray together. We cannot give away what we don’t have. It is good for us to have opportunities to experience the power of God to heal and change us, and how we, in turn, can give that away to others. That also requires being open and honest with one another, being safe communities where we can face our issues with one another’s support and help. It means taking time to repent, individually and as communities, where we have fallen short of God’s call. It means reviving fasting. I think that a season – a year or so – of intentional preparation spent in these three things (even setting some things down for a time in order to do so) will be a well-spent investment bringing great returns.
2. Activation – this is where the rubber hits the road. The preparation has a point. That point is to minister to one another (the education needs to include the *how*) and to reveal God’s kingdom among the broken and lost. We need to actually tell people about Jesus and to invite them to join us. We have something awesome to offer – let’s be bold and excited about it. It means actually praying with (and for) people, especially for healing. It also means such things as planting new churches and congregations. Perhaps it is time to set ourselves a goal something like doing so in at least two communities (High Level? Sexsmith?) within three years. That also likely means hiring missionaries and evangelists. It also needs to take into account where we are going as much as where we’ve been. Our buildings and infrastructure must help make this reality – they must serve our mission and not the other way around. We do not do these things in order to keep what we have, but to put what we have at God’s disposal with no strings attached. It means our hiring, planning and meetings are all centred around equipping our people and in connecting with the people of the province to help them meet Jesus.
3. Harvest – at some point we have to actually speak the words of invitation. We will hear more about that this weekend. Jesus told the disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers, as the fields were ripe. We should anticipate that if we are doing what God has asked us to do, He will back it up with His grace. This also calls us to consider carefully *why and how* we do such things as baptism, confirmation and marriage preparation. These are sacraments of commitment. We are talking about people’s salvation and of walking God’s way. We need to be honest with people about the cost and about the incredible joy,

transformation and value that this brings. It is time to let go of any sense of retreat or fear. Instead, we encourage each other with the stories of what God is doing, we take chances in reaching out and we trust that God will keep His promise. We also need to always be very careful about our motivation – God’s love and mercy for a hurting world. As new people join the church, we will experience change and need to be prepared and open to it. We can accomplish this together, each contributing to the whole by what we have been given. As Paul said, one plants, another waters, but God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:5-11).

4. Discipleship – in a sense this “closes the circle.” We cannot reach out until we are ourselves first disciplined. Here, though, is the commitment to be ready for when people come to Christ. Living as a Christian is not like living according to the world. It is a life completely devoted to God, and is not “natural” or “normal”. We need to be prepared to patiently walk with people (as we do with one another) as they learn this new life. As people being ourselves healed and changed, we remember that those who join us will be imperfect and broken. This means having tools and mentors ready that help people learn to pray, to worship, to read scripture, to share about Jesus, and to be a part of the body. It may be that we are best served to develop courses and offer training at the diocesan level so we can share the gifts and talents among us. Of course, these are all things we are first doing to prepare ourselves. This means, too, being serious about biblical standards of morals and life. We cannot afford to compromise what we believe or to be moulded into unchristian ways.

Of course, these things won’t just happen. We have so much of what we need – tremendous ordained and lay leadership and growing experience and deepening spirituality. There are other pieces we continue to need to put into place. Financially speaking, we have intentionally been moving in this direction, though in small steps. We have taken smaller Council of the North grants. We have made careful decisions in managing the finances God has given. These are not done simply for security or to preserve ourselves, but in order that we have the resources to accomplish our purpose. As you are generous, we are able to support one another better in each step. More than that, we are able to pursue excellence in training and in seeking clergy and mission staff to be successful. There is no need to settle for second or third best. In addition, I believe God is calling people from among us to serve full-time with their lives as priests, evangelists, educators, deacons and administrators. We want to be able to equip them and pay them. We need to proactively identify these callings in people and encourage and challenge them to respond. God provides for the mission He calls us to: financially, supernaturally, infrastructure and people. Everything is already here among us. The question is whether or not we’re willing to release it into His hands for the purposes for which He gave it in the first place.

We live in a time of upheaval in many ways, both within and outside the church. It is an opportunity for us to look at what we do and why we do it and to intentionally commit ourselves to God’s mission for us. We need not fear, but commit ourselves to the communion of saints, through the world and through time. Whatever others do, we will serve the Lord and every relationship, action and commitment must serve that purpose. We are not alone in committing ourselves to the very mission Jesus himself gave us. I mentioned earlier about being at the Canterbury School for new bishops. At least two or three of the other bishops expressed very specifically a desire to establish a partner relationship with us. This was even though I was clear we aren’t in a position to be financial benefactors. These Africans were just as clear that that was not what they were asking – they wanted to be partners in the gospel. That is another tool we may want to establish and pursue. So too, I had an opportunity in the spring to visit with the Bishop and Mission Officer of the Diocese of Dallas in the United States. They were very encouraging and offered to make their expertise and experience available to us. The Diocese is one of what were only three in TEC that were actually growing. If we step up, we can be sure that God will answer our faith and that the communion of saints will walk with us.

I hope, in a sense, that some of what I say to you tonight scares you a little bit. The call of God is not measured by our ability to do it easily or at all. The call of God cannot be accomplished in our own ability. That is why He has called us to be His body and to be clay jars. I hope and pray that this idea of our responsibility not just for our own town or congregation, but for all of Northern Alberta haunts you. Any one of our congregations by itself would

desperately struggle to meet this challenge, but we are not called as separate congregations – and do not even exist as such. The Holy Spirit took 120 people gathered on the day of Pentecost and transformed history. We are at least that many(!). Surely He can use us to transform Northern Alberta, and even the world, if we, too, are available to Him and willing to be used. I hope we will step up and embrace this call. We may begin with developing a plan of action as a diocese and parishes, beginning with a preparation year, educating ourselves and being built up in the grace of God. I hope, too, that each congregation and parishioner might be contagiously infected with this vision. At the very least, I would ask as many of you as are servants of God to give yourselves to prayer and fasting for the Diocese and for the people we live among. I know without any doubt that God will use us and transform this province. I pray you say, “yes,” to Him.

Zechariah 4:6: “He said to me, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by strength, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.”

May His Kingdom come, and His will be done. Amen.