

“How long?” you may ask “How long, O Lord, how long will we have to put up with our Suffragan giving Presidential addresses?” You may wish to be delivered from me but I cannot promise that there won’t be a next time. But if there isn’t, I would simply want to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks for your support and kindness and for the many prayers which have been offered up for me.

If I were to be asked the question I posed at the last Synod – will we be in good heart for the next bishop? – I would answer a resounding yes. My yes is based on a number of things. It’s based on the Sunday by Sunday visits to parishes, where people of God meet, pray, worship, study – where they are simply together. It’s based on the various lunches I have with clergy and lay people where you can get under the skin of what’s going on for people, life in its richness and rawness. In these encounters in public and in private one gets a feel for a diocese; it’s not scientific, by its nature it’s random. But one gets a feel, a sense for how things are. And my feeling is that we’re doing OK. More than OK.

And that continues to be backed by evidence. We are still a growing diocese. The national statistics released by the Church of England yesterday confirm that this is still the case. In fact we are just one of 7 growing dioceses. Adults, children, Sunday, midweek – there are growth points in all areas of parish life. And we have more people exploring vocations than we have had in years. It is truly heartening.

There is plenty still to do. The growth is there, but it is fragile. And while we can celebrate that we are growing in weekly and Sunday attendance we need to recognise that 4 in 10 of our regulars are over 70 years old and on average we have 7 adults to every one child in church. And while we can rejoice in the stories of changed lives we have not seen a growth in confirmations and I wonder what this says about discipleship, proper preparation for initiation, admission to communion and our understanding of belonging.

I remain concerned about teaching in preparation for confirmation – I am embarrassed when candidates tell me they have only had a couple of sessions to prepare them but can't quite remember what they were about. It is not easy to get testimonies at Confirmations. If we can't speak about our belief in God, especially at key moments on our faith journey, we will continue to struggle to get out the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So I think we need to remain serious-minded about purpose. We must continue to attend to the basics of learning and teaching if we to become a flourishing diocese. And we should constantly remind people about their commitment as Christians if our Christian communities are to flourish.

We know we still need to grow our giving base – we have heard this morning that it is a vulnerable giving base – and, as we have been challenged today, we must set a much higher level of expectation. We must not be reliant on a declining few to keep the mission alive. We know that the reliance on the generosity of an ageing congregation is not going to secure the church for future generations. Giving and stewardship cannot rely on initiatives that occur only once in a decade: Lent challenges us about almsgiving so why cannot giving be an annual Lenten challenge for us as individuals and for our congregations? Nothing tells God (and others) as much about our priorities as a look at how we spend our money. What we choose to spend our money on – and what we don't – is hugely telling about the sort of people we are and where our hearts lie. The equivalent of a cup of coffee or a pint of beer a week doesn't signify serious commitment. But we don't seem to dare to tell people – and to challenge people nearly often enough. And the most effective witnesses in delivering this message are our laity.

We need to grow new leaders – and that, too, is a challenge for our laity. When was the last time your church pews nurtured a vocation? I often ask parishes where they think their Vicars have come from – and the answer is obvious: parishes like them. We need both to develop what we have and to initiate what we don't. Our leaders will not necessarily be ordained and may not even be licensed in the traditional sense. But these leaders will be called by God and

recognised by us all as people willing and able to help others grow in Christ. Are you encouraging leaders – and are you telling potential leaders that you believe they have the necessary gifts? There is strong evidence that this is the most effective way of finding new leaders. Many of those exploring their vocation to ordained ministry tell me that it is because of the promptings of others that they have woken up to their calling and felt encouraged to explore it.

We need good leaders to grow healthy churches. Healthy for today and healthy for the future. We must not simply maintain what we have because it pleases us, a style of service that we like, a nice Sunday routine, a security without challenge, a place to retreat to and in which to hide. That is not health but a disease of carelessness that will lead towards decline and closure. It will foster the church as a club for its members, a body set apart from the world and unable to engage in it, a hollow and shallow form of what and who we should be. In this season of Lent, let us examine ourselves for the selfishness that prefers things to stay as we like them.

But I do think we are becoming something else. I see increasingly outward looking places seeking to serve the community being a beacon of hope. In the best of our churches I see that. In the food-banks, debt counselling, youth groups, toddlers groups and interest groups I see that. That heartens me for it is where we should be. And I believe that a church that has a strong engagement with the world outside is a church that will not only grow but will also grow with a sense of purpose.

I remain unapologetic about the importance of the church observing and reflecting on what is happening outside our walls and how this affects our communities. I thank God for Christian publications that help us to that. I am a reader of *The Tablet* and their Leader today helpfully reflects on this week's budget: I quote parts of it:

"Mr Osborne was entitled to enjoy his good fortune, while putting a smile on the faces of millions of voters from bingo players to beer-drinkers, particularly those who like a whisky chaser financed from a pension drawdown..... Nevertheless, Mr Osborne risks a growing credibility gap as people on average pay in average

jobs notice the contrast between the land of milk and honey he is rejoicing in, and their increasingly dire daily struggle to pay their bills and feed their families.....Jobs are being created at an unprecedented rate, but many are for low pay and low skill, with little security. Productivity is actually falling.....Meanwhile Mr Osborne's buoyant Britain is also becoming food-bank Britain. Many people in insecure low paid jobs means more people on the very margins, looking for work, living on meagre benefits, and under threat of losing even those if they fail to meet the strict conditions. To them the Budget must have been utterly depressing – the country is being invited to celebrate but they do not have a ticket to the party."

We must not be afraid to reflect and to engage and to show that we care. I am grateful for those who do – it is this that shows we are worth joining because it is God's love being put into practice. This is sacrificial and I am aware of the time and energy that many in this room and across our diocese have put into community engagement and as a result, there are some signs of growth. I am also aware that there is no one factor, no magic ingredient that will guarantee growth. We have to look at a number of areas and ideas.

This is underlined in the national report "From Anecdote to Evidence" written by the Church Growth Research Programme published by the Church of England. It makes interesting reading and I urge you, if you have not already done so, to read it. Stating clearly there is "no single recipe for growth" it helpfully sets out eight factors associated with growth, factors that should inspire and challenge us in our own ministries and contexts.

I don't intend in this address to tackle each factor individually. There are some which for me instinctively tie in with the Liverpool experience. So having churches that both innovate and are willing to change seems to me to be a very basic requirement. Similarly we need to look to our clergy to inspire their congregations and be intentional about growth. And, as I have already stated, we need our churches to be fully connected with their community.

I will pick three factors that I think are worthy of further comment.

Firstly, the need to encourage and nurture discipleship. I have already mentioned the challenge around the decline in numbers coming forward for confirmation and how well we disciple people. We must take a fresh look in our parishes and deaneries around how our people grow in Christ. Our growth agenda is entitled "Growing in Christ" deliberately because it implies the need for discipleship and experiencing the deep joy of seeing someone truly get God.

That thinking has helped lead me to issuing the Bible Alive challenge. I believe that the way to become mature disciples of Christ is to be alive to scripture, to truly make it our inspirational text. I have been encouraged by what I hear of parishes and schools taking up this challenge – I will be contacting every parish to get an idea of what they are doing.

Secondly the report highlights the need to encourage lay leadership. I have already mentioned the need to grow leaders. So while we still pursue our LifeCall vocations agenda to meet the challenge of retiring clergy we also have our drive for Local Missional Leadership. This is a crucial agenda to enhance opportunities and ensuring every congregation has a recognised leader and pastor.

Finally the report shows that churches need to engage with children and young people. Today, it has been vastly encouraging to hear two young people speak of their experience of the Virginia Pilgrimage - but how many youngsters across our Diocese get the opportunity to experience something as life-changing as that? Many of us had faith-enhancing experiences in our early and mid-teens but I wonder how much we think of handing that on. We need to understand more clearly why they don't come to church and what they are looking for from their faith and how we can encourage this young generation to be active members of our community. But we need to do this with enquiring minds and open hearts as we enquire about a generation we struggle to comprehend. Listening to our young people comes before talking to them and about them.

These are important challenges but I know that our diocese rises to the challenges set before us. It is because we are a strong diocese, in good heart and growing that we can continue to look for the areas we need to tackle. It is, if

you like, a virtuous circle of improvement. Moving from anecdote to evidence is precisely what we have been doing – it has enabled us to identify and tackle those burning platforms of ageing money, retiring clergy and broken buildings. It is the secure anchor of our claim to growth.

We mustn't lose our focus on growth but nor must we forget the purpose of growth. If we have grown for growth's sake then we will not have succeeded. And we need to remember that success is not an attribute of God, vulnerability is. That is how we grow in Christ – as individuals and as a diocese. We must be alive to the call that Jesus makes to his disciples to follow him. We must remember we do this because God commands us, chooses us, equips us and empowers us to do it. Not for ourselves, nor for our own worth (and as we are in Lent, let us repent of the times when we use our place in the life of the Church to bolster our own sense of self-esteem) but because it is the work of the kingdom, to make disciples and proclaim the Gospel afresh for each and every generation.

That is the life which Christ so wants to share with us but it goes beyond the boundary of self. God wants to share it with us; he wants us to share it with others. Jesus promises that from the death of the one believing in him will flow fountains of living water.

© Bishop of Warrington

**March 2014**