

Presidential Address: Diocesan Synod May 28, 2022

Friends, I want to say to you today without equivocation or apology that what we are trying to do in the Diocese of Truro at the moment is to attempt the impossible. What we are trying to do in the Diocese of Truro right now is to attempt the impossible. And I want to say too that that is *exactly* what, as the Church of God, we should be doing. That is our core task, and our core business: to attempt the impossible.

I will justify those words later on, and indeed I hope we will hear too the challenge and the invitation to us in those words – a challenge and invitation not from me, so much as from our God himself. But before we get to that point let me explain more prosaically what I hope to do in this Presidential Address. I hope, essentially, to ‘front-end’ our Annual Report and give an overview of the journey we have been on in this last year. So just where have we been? And where might we be going?

Let’s be clear first of all that this last year has been very tough. We are still coming out of a pandemic and that has been incredibly painful. There has of course been the pain of personal losses, and there has also been the pain of the disruption to the worshipping and missional life of the Church that has not always been easy to navigate. Far from it, indeed.

And we cannot blind ourselves to the pain in the wider world too. This last year has seen the launch of a war in Ukraine that our Archbishops have rightly described as an act of great evil. That has resulted in refugees being on the move in Europe on a scale not seen since the end of WWII. We are not untouched by that and nor should we be. And we face a very significant cost of living crisis too, precipitated in part, though not wholly, by that war, and in a place like Cornwall, already facing significant deprivation, that will strike very hard.

I remain immensely grateful to you all in this Diocese for the wonderful way you have risen to the challenges these hard times have thrown up for us. I remind you again of the words of one Cornwall Councillor who said to me, ‘*I think the community response to the pandemic has been outstanding.*’ But then he paused and said, ‘*Mind you, without the churches it would have been negligible.*’ So thank you for all you have given, and continue to give, in loving service of our communities, in so many different ways. I see it and am humbled by it.

I know that leading church communities through such times has produced significant challenges. We’ve talked a lot about ‘fruitfulness’ and ‘sustainability’ in the ‘On the Way’ process – of which more anon – but we can’t talk about the fruitfulness and sustainability of

the Church unless we also address questions of the fruitfulness and sustainability of the Church's ministers. Life-giving leadership is a key element of both fruitfulness and sustainability. We've been working on that this last year, and we will be looking specifically at the issue of clergy well-being at our next meeting in September. It matters hugely that we take good care of those who lead us in mission and ministry, both for their own sake and for the sake of the church they lead.

And in that light I do want to assure Synod that I am very mindful of how the cost of living crisis is affecting clergy. To that end we have set up a fund that clergy can draw from to help meet increased heating bills, and we will keep this scheme and the demand for support under careful review. Furthermore our early thinking about the 2023 budget assumes a significant increase in stipend levels.

But as we look at the world in which we live, and the pain it - and we - face, one thing I am sure of this: this world needs God's church to be the very best it can be, so we can attend to our core business of loving this world in word and in deed in the name of Jesus in the very best way we can. This world really does need God's church to be the very best it can be. And I want to say that the 'On the Way' process, which many of you have been involved with this year, is all about that – it's about helping us, together, to be the very best we can be, for our God and for his world.

And if we're to be the very best we can be, then yes, we need to be both fruitful and sustainable: and I am convinced we need to attend to both. If we attend only to sustainability then we'll end up institutionalising decline as we slice the cake ever smaller. If we attend only to fruitfulness then we might come up with all kinds of grandiose ventures that in the end are simply undeliverable. As for us individually, so for our churches: we must attend to both.

Most of that planning for fruitfulness and sustainability must happen locally. As Simon Cade says, we need to recognise that the world experts in mission and ministry in any one place are the people of God already in that place, and while we all have something to learn from each other, it must start with the local. Most of the planning for fruitfulness and sustainability must happen locally – and although it's been painful in some places, it's been a real delight to see a number of deaneries find fresh vision, energy and indeed unity through the work of 'On the Way'. And I make no apology for putting the emphasis on the local in the process. Far from it. This is emphatically not about top-down imposition, but local empowerment, as many people in this room can testify: and rightly so. This is about local communities, imagining, in

the Spirit, just what different and better, just what fruitfulness and sustainability, might look like in the particular places to which we have been sent; to which we have been called. And that ought, fundamentally, to be an exciting exercise to undertake. Indeed I believe that for many it already has been so, as exciting, bold plans are developed. And I'm delighted by that.

But that proper emphasis on the local does not mean we are passive at the 'centre' as it were. What's sauce for the deanery goose must be sauce for the diocesan gander too, as it were. So let me outline four critical decisions we've taken at the 'centre' this last year and are rolling out now to accompany 'On the Way'.

First, we are integrating the work of Transforming Mission and 'On the Way' bringing them both under one overall project board, chaired by +Hugh. There has been some fantastic work going on under the TM banner, but we said from the start that we wanted that work to be a blessing to the wider church, and by taking on a more integrated approach I'm sure we can better work to that end. And to that end we are recruiting to a new part-time post of Director of Change and Renewal to enable that to happen and – crucially - to support the roll-out of the exciting bold plans that local deaneries are discerning through 'On the Way'. And I'm delighted to announce today that that post will not be funded from MMF income (indeed that was never the plan), and nor will it be funded from our reserves, as we had at first planned. Instead it will be funded directly by the Church Commissioners, through an initial grant of £140,000, as an expression of their support for, and of their confidence in, the On the Way process. And I'm delighted to share the good news of that grant with you today.

Second, we have made a commitment to reduce Church House costs by at least quarter of a million pounds and savings of at least that amount, and probably more, will be reflected in next year's budget. That amounts to some 12% of our shared costs budget. That has not been done without some pain, including redundancies of some fine members of staff, and it will reduce our central ability to serve our parishes, but I'm sure it's the right thing to do. So when people complain about central costs then please remind them those costs are decreasing, not rising. We are all responsible for the careful stewardship of what is entrusted to us, both in our parishes and at the diocesan centre, and I take that responsibility very seriously.

And in that light I do just want to say that reports you may have seen in the press suggesting I am setting up some kind of central unit in Church House under the leadership of the Director of Change and Renewal at an extra cost of several hundreds of thousands of pounds are simply fanciful. We are reducing, not increasing our central costs.

Third we have committed to ensure that £800,000 of the funds received from the Archbishops' Council to support ministry in areas of economic deprivation, money known as Lowest Income Community Funding (LICF), is actually spent in and with the communities for whom it is intended. For too long we have used this money just to underwrite our deficit: but no longer. Now it will be targeted where it is needed, and the decisions about which those places should be are being taken locally through the 'On the Way' process – and rightly so.

Fourthly, as a matter of integrity, having received support from national reserves to set up the TM projects, we want to replicate that by drawing from our own reserves to invest in those deaneries that have not so far received TM funding. So this last year the BDC has committed to investing at least £2 million over the next five to seven years from our reserves to support creative local initiatives in mission, and I am delighted we're going to do so. And I certainly look forward to those innovative plans that have been prayerfully imagined through 'On the Way' coming to fruition helped by such funding.

Those funds might of course be used to increase staffing in deaneries, whether of lay or ordained people, and there may be more money coming through the pipeline as a result of the very generous settlement from the Church Commissioners for the next Triennium, although we await details of how it will be distributed. (I myself was on the national group which came up with those proposals and I'm delighted with the results of our work.) Equally in some deaneries clergy numbers might reduce: but if they do that will be as a result of a local decision to do so. There is no diocesan plan to reduce them. Certainly there has been some inaccurate reporting on that score. In the one deanery where it was reported there were to be cuts of 1.5 posts out of a total of 5, the deanery plan actually envisages clergy numbers staying the same with one post part funded through the LICF money.

Let me now make all this just a little more personal. When I was interviewed to be Bishop of Truro, I said this: *'I believe in the ministry of the parish church, I've devoted many years of my life to it, and I want to see each and every one renewed and revitalised in discipleship, evangelism, growth, service, confidence, hope and love – because it's just wonderful when that happens.'* And I gladly reaffirm those words today.

And it's because I believe in the ministry of the parish church that one of our five priorities – and these are words again that had their origin in my interview: one of our five priorities is that we should be, 'a Church that is confident in its calling'. And in so many way that is just what 'On the Way' is enabling and calling us to be: 'a Church that is confident in its calling'.

To quote again what I said back in 2018: *Fundamentally this is all about churches ‘noticing’ - noticing who we are, where we are, who we are amongst, what God is doing here, and then discerning what part he is calling us to play – that’s to say it’s a process of paying attention, and of paying attention to our God above all. So it must be a fundamentally prayerful process. If the Church is to be [confident in its calling] and reshaped for mission, then that is only going to happen through the Spirit’s transforming work amongst us, individually and collectively.*

And that is exactly the process that has been unfolding over this last year, and which will continue amongst us as we look to our God to guide us ‘On the Way’: it’s a prayerful process of paying attention to our God. And a particular joy of this last year has been to see the ‘On the Way’ weekly online prayer meeting set up, and to see it so well attended.

Now that process of discerning how God is calling us onwards isn’t easy, and nor should we pretend otherwise. For all its potential excitement, it is not without its pain. Indeed, to come back to where I began, in many ways it is next to impossible. Here we are, disparate people, with our preferences and dislikes, sometimes fearful of the future, often irritated with each other. And all of that in a culture that is very often indifferent to the faith we long to share. We really should not underestimate the extent to which the Christian faith has lost the confidence, trust and engagement of the majority of people in the West. We have failed to pass the faith on to successive generations. That is at heart the real, the genuine, challenge we face. And in the face of that, how can we possibly hear God’s call; how can we really be confident in our calling and be reshaped for mission, when just keeping going, keeping the show on the road, is about all we can manage? Aren’t I just asking too much? And isn’t, maybe, God asking too much of us too?

It’s an understandable question, and that’s exactly why I chose these words from the gospel of Luke to be read at my service of welcome in January 2019, words to which I return today: *Jesus said, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ He replied, ‘What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.’*

All that we are attempting as a Diocese is impossible for us. We simply cannot do it by ourselves. We cannot do it. And nor should we even try. We can only do it with the help of our God. Which is why I have come to the growing realisation in recent days that above all else this is a test of faith for us; this is a test of our trust in our God: because, *‘what is impossible*

for mortals is possible for God. Change; fruitfulness and sustainability, are indeed possible for our God, and therefore for his Church, if we will but trust him.

Today I do want to say to you that God is already doing the impossible amongst us. I have been so encouraged in recent weeks by stories of growth in our parish churches, of new people, of children, coming. It's a joy, week in week out, to visit those churches. Wonderful, remarkable things are happening through our TM projects. Many people are exploring how our God might be calling them on mission and ministry, possibly through ordination. Our 'Pioneers in Cornwall' network is up and running with people exploring innovative ways of reaching out with the good news in word and in deed. All sorts of creative events are being planned for the Archbishop's upcoming mission amongst us. The 'Share stories: share Jesus' workshops in preparation for that mission have been electrifying. Many have come to Tea Time Talks, our intergenerational roadshow and been blessed and excited by them. And the list goes on. So do not doubt that our God is already doing the impossible amongst us. And where that is happening it is simply because people are trusting him to do just that.

And, as I say, that, I think, is the simple and the biggest test we face. Will we trust our God for the future or not? I assure you that is a challenge I feel very keenly myself. But that is the question I want to leave us with today as we look forward to another year: will we trust our God for the future - or not? Will we engage in the adventurous, risky faith he calls us too – or not? He is in the business of doing the impossible, if we will but trust him for it.

I leave you that with that question, and I close with this glorious prayer for us, the Church of God - the Church of our God, for whom nothing is impossible: a prayer from the letter to the Ephesians. Let us pray:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father... I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.