

## Bishop Michael Bird's Charge to the Second Session of Synod:



Tomorrow is the Fifth Sunday of Lent and the readings appointed for the day focus upon the upcoming death of Jesus that is the fulfillment of the “new covenant” that the prophet Jeremiah speaks of in the Old Testament reading: *“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, ... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”*

In the 58th Chapter of the Book of Isaiah, we hear the prophets response to the people’s complaint that God had not shown mercy even though, in their estimation, they had been faithful to the will of God in the form of their outward rituals and liturgies: *“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! ... Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.”*

In each one of these readings from scripture God’s people are called to reexamine their role in participating in God’s mission for the world. Time and time again throughout the Old and New Testaments there comes a challenge to see our lives and our ministry from a different perspective; not through our own eyes but through the eyes of God.

Tomorrow we will hear Jeremiah call the people of his generation to look at their covenant relationship in a new way; through a new set of lenses; a relationship with God and each other that is far more than a set of rules and regulations ... a covenant written on stone tablets .... this is a covenant that penetrates deep into the very fiber of their being ....it is written not on stone but on their hearts!

Most importantly, however, as we focus upon the foreshadowing of Jesus’ ordeal upon the cross in John’s gospel, as we reflect upon all that Christ’s death would mean and would accomplish; it is true that his life and death provides us with a new set of lenses to view our own lives and our own ministry. Never again, can we contemplate human power and authority in the same way ...never again, can we look upon human suffering and need in the same way, ...and how clearer in the wake of the crucifixion is our call to move beyond our own inward looking and self-serving wants and desires. Time and time again we are called to look at the world not through our own eyes but through the eyes of God.

Over the past several months a strong sense has begun to emerge that God is calling us as a diocesan family to look upon our life and work through a new set of lenses.

We are beginning to dream and imagine a church in such a way that when people throughout Southern Ontario think of the work of Poverty Reduction, or Environmental Sustainability ....they think of the Anglican Church and the Diocese of Niagara.

It is a Church where every congregation has a ministry covenant in place that highlights the partnership that exists between the congregation, the clergy and the bishop as we strive to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. We can envisage conversations being facilitated in parishes across the diocese about what it is in worship that changes people’s lives and about making the Gospel more accessible to people who presently see us as boring or irrelevant. We want to embrace the work of Fresh Expressions and encourage, in significant and tangible ways, innovation and new ideas and we want to provide the resources and the inspiration to allow these things to happen.

One of the commitments I made as I accepted this Episcopal role was to listen carefully to people across Niagara as we looked to the future and I want to take a few minutes to tell you what I have heard in the regional meetings and in the many other ways that pieces of communication have come my way:

1. We need to slow the Vision process down. People in parishes are not clear about what some of the material means. There are many questions about what the implications of the vision will be for them and for their communities.
2. That we need to share stories and to continue to communicate what the elements of the vision could look like and what are the opportunities that our vision offers.
3. At the same time, people seem to have heard and responded to my desire usher in a new sense of partnership between the bishop and the parish and this now has to be applied to bringing the vision forward
4. That I need to take more time personally to engage with smaller groups across the diocese and to allow people to hear about what I believe it means and why I am so committed to seeing a vision articulated.
5. There is a great deal of concern around parish finances and around the financial challenges we face at a diocesan level and, particularly, at Cathedral Place.
6. The work of Stewardship and making available stewardship resources will be critical to our future work and ministry together.
7. People are concerned that this will end up as just another program to be down-loaded on the local church.

Having heard all of this, it is clear to me and to others that we need to slow down the process of visioning and to move into a new phase of communicating and engaging with clergy and people at the parish level.

When we began this process, the first round of feedback that I heard was the feeling that we have invested in these kinds of processes before and that nothing ever seems to come from them. In an attempt to demonstrate a strong intention that this would not be the case this time, I can now see that we may have erred on the side of pushing too quickly. Having said that, I think it is also safe to say that no one can doubt my sincerity and my determination that the status quo will no longer be an option. For this vision to be fulfilled, I hope and pray that each one of you will come to believe that God's Holy Spirit is at work in this. It is my prayer that you too begin to believe passionately that this vision is the will of God for the Diocese of Niagara. Just over a year ago I accepted the call from God and the invitation from you to the work and ministry of the Diocesan Bishop. That calling has changed my life dramatically and I am still very enthusiastic and optimistic about the ministry that we are sharing in together. What I have absolutely no interest in, however, is a ministry of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. I need your commitment, your willingness to journey and take risks, your capacity to dream and think outside the box, in order to build upon and grow the work and ministry of this diocese in the days to come.

I am therefore inviting every parish in the diocese of Niagara to make use of the vision as it now stands, as a lens, through which you will review and reflect upon your own life and ministry. Let me assure that the same process will be undertaken as we reflect upon our work at Cathedral Place and as I review my own ministry as your Bishop.

It may be that one piece of the vision speaks to your congregation at this particular moment or perhaps a discussion around several of the areas of focus can serve as a springboard for some new initiatives. There will be opportunities to celebrate and acknowledge the things that you are currently engaging in. I want to hear about the journeys that these conversations have launched. I want to know how the vision can be given more clarity and what is missing. Most importantly I need you to tell me what resources you need from the synod office to allow an intentional reflection of this kind to happen. Some of you have communicated this to me already.

The 2009 budget acknowledges the role of Cathedral Place and the Cathedral itself as one of the centerpieces for our new vision. We have begun the work of addressing the financial challenges we face in operating Cathedral Place and the Cathedral property but far more will need to be done in this calendar year to develop a plan for long-term sustainability. We are no longer contemplating the formal Diocesan wide Cathedral campaign that had as a target 4 million dollars. I have, however, given my support to the effort of adding significantly to the outstanding total that has already been raised by the Cathedral congregation and I want to acknowledge with profound gratitude all those who have donated to the Preserve to Serve Campaign. The Dean, the Cathedral Wardens and I have agreed to set up a task force to explore the entire spectrum of possibilities around the future of Cathedral Place that will include governance options, property use, and new models for ministry.

I am pleased to announce that Rob Reid has accepted my appointment as the chair of this task force and the goal is to have an interim report available for the Members of Synod in November of this year. We now have a plan in place for addressing a deficit position in the short term, but I am more concerned about making sure that the solutions we arrive at are sustainable well into the future and, at the same time, support the goals and objectives of our new vision.

The second piece of the budget that is important to me is the acknowledgement it offers that some of our parishes are struggling under the current economic hardships and other unique situations that present a real challenge. We have freed up \$150,000 dollars to offer parishes some much needed relief in this area and we have earmarked a further \$150,000 reduction for 2010. What we have heard in the regional meetings is that this may not be enough. We have also been given a small preview of the challenges and the incredibly difficult and painful decisions that will need to be made to allow those cuts to the DM&M to be possible. It seems apparent now that in slowing down our visioning process, that even in 2010 we will be looking at a transitional budget. Let us be clear, however, that our goal in the very near future will be a vision driven budget that acknowledges the realities of the ministries that we are called by God to engage in and will be in keeping with the resources and the financial realities we face. Someone mentioned to me that the changes we have made over the past several weeks with regard to the agenda of Synod makes it look like we don't have our act together.... well I am here to say to you that in some sense we don't have our act together but the pledge I am bringing to you this morning is that we are getting our act together! I am so very grateful for all the many hours of work that has brought us to this stage in the journey. Let me give you an exciting example of this!

Following up on the commitment which I made just prior to the first session of Synod in November, and in light of various conversations which have taken place since, especially my meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury in January, I have asked the Dean to facilitate the work of a small group of laity and clergy from across the diocese in bringing to me suggested rites for the Blessing of Civilly Married Same-Sex Couples. You will recall that Synod in 2007 asked the Bishop to allow clergy, whose conscience permits, to bless the marriages of civilly married same-sex couples, where at least one of the partners is baptized. I anticipate that these rites will be prepared by later this spring, and that I will be able to present them to the clergy of the diocese at the Annual Clergy and Licensed Layworkers Conference in May. I will be giving my permission to proceed shortly thereafter.

*"Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! ...Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard."*

I invite you all to join with me in lifting up your voices and shouting out for joy because I believe that a light is dawning upon the Diocese of Niagara and that that light is allowing us to see the beginnings and the glimpses of a new and exciting path ahead. It is my privilege and my great pleasure to walk along beside you as we strike out upon this new adventure. May God's richest blessings go with us all in the days and years to come.