

## **Bishop Martin Seeley writes...**

While I do not usually make New Year's resolutions, I know 2024 will be my last full calendar year as bishop in Suffolk.

So I have been trying to make some plans for what I want to try to do, realising full well what happens to best-laid plans!

Bishops are meant to retire when they are 70 – so for me, the end of May 2024 – but I have been given an extension into 2025.

So as I look towards the New Year, I do so with more than the usual apprehension and anticipation.

And I find myself looking into 2024 very aware of what I want to try to do before I finish in Suffolk, both in my community-wide role across Suffolk, and then my responsibilities to support the life of Church of England churches across our county in their worship and service.

One of the particular joys about serving here is that by and large people expect the church to play a role in the pastoral and social as well as spiritual needs of the whole community, recognising that you really can't separate them.

Jesus committed his followers to that mission when he declared his own mission to be to "bring good news to the poor...proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

I am continually grateful I am reminded of the church's pastoral role whenever I pick up my shepherd's crook.

And my chief role in this is supporting clergy and congregations in living the Christian gospel as they engage with the pastoral, social and spiritual needs of their communities.

So in my county-wide role there are two broad areas I particularly want to highlight where I hope I can do more work before I finish.

First is our care and support of young people. Youngsters face huge challenges, and the resources to support them, though in some areas are better than they were, still leave a great deal to be desired.

For the past five years I have convened a group of people who play some of the key roles in supporting young people across the county.

We have tried to identify needs, channel resources, and in general help the great many people and organisations working in this arena to be more connected with each other.

And we have been encouraging young people to be included in decision making that involves them or has an impact on them.

I remain concerned about mental health provision for youngsters, special educational needs provision, and what is available for those who are permanently excluded. I still hope to make at least a small dent in at least one of those areas

This is clearly an area where the pastoral, social and spiritual intertwine inseparably.

Secondly, I am about to have the honour of serving as the President of the Suffolk Agricultural Association, and in that role want to continue to support farmers and all those involved in the agricultural industry in our county – as well as look forward to another fabulous Suffolk Show.

Again, young people are one focus for me, and I am hoping to find ways to support efforts to introduce more secondary aged youngsters to the world of farming – and to possible careers.

I am keen too to do what I can to play my part to support farmers as they continue to engage with the challenges of changing funding and grant arrangements, and to support the growing movement towards sustainable practices to care for the environment and improve biodiversity. And to engage with what we can do to make good fresh food affordable.

Our engagement with the land, as partners in the care of creation, is again pastoral, social and spiritual – as well as economic.

So if those are a couple of the areas I want to do more in for our county, what am I wanting to tackle within the life of the church?

These can be summed up in one word: sustainability.

I want to continue to sustain and support our clergy and lay ministers as best I can.

I want to have a solid plan on track to bring our diocesan finances back into a sustainable position.

And I want to develop a plan to ensure our wonderful church buildings are sustainable, as spiritual beacons across our county.

These are not new areas, but continuations of what has been going on for some time, and where I think a little more work by me in the next year could make a significant impact, not least in relieving pressure on clergy and congregations to be released to engage with even more passion in the pastoral, social and spiritual mission for which they exist.

And as I write this I find myself becoming more and more excited at what 2024 will bring, and the good that could be possible, knowing too that God may yet have rather different ideas!