

Looking Back, Looking Forward: 2014-2024

Synod Address 26 October 2024:

I gave my first Synod address in this room in June 2015. That was, some of you may recall, not only my first Diocesan Synod with you, but my first ever Diocesan Synod. This, I think it is reasonable to assume, will be my last ever Diocesan Synod.

I re-read the address I gave over nine years ago. There were some very familiar themes, many of which we have engaged with well, and necessarily continue to engage with. I want to touch on a few of them, just to reflect on the journey we have travelled together over this nearly a decade, but also to look forward, in particular to the next year. Unsurprisingly, four of the themes are the same as the four I committed to focus on for my last eighteen months, so this is by way of reporting back too.

After the break you will have a chance to look at the priorities reflected in the Diocese's "Statement of Needs" for the next diocesan bishop and I'm grateful to you all, and the many hundreds of other people from all walks of life across Suffolk, who took the time to contribute their thoughts to this.

So looking back and at the same time look forward, what seem to me to be key themes?

First of all, I want to talk about working and serving together. One of the things I have tried to do, and wish I'd focussed on even more, is to foster a culture of being joined up, connected to one another, seeing ourselves part of a larger whole to which we belong and where we share responsibility. That's across the diocese, across deaneries, across benefices, between the parishes and the diocesan operations. I am personally hugely grateful to Joe Hawes for enabling us together to build a much closer connection between the bishop in Ipswich and the cathedral in Bury.

All of which means, please do not lose momentum or hold back progress in doing things because you think you should let the new bishop decide – I'm very confident that they will be only too pleased that you have decided – and that you will have decided prayerfully under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We have journeyed and we will continue to journey together – this is what has worked and will continue to work well for the mission of the church at both diocesan and local level.

When we move forward as one, as the Body of Christ in our many different contexts, we continue to learn that the more we work together and with a shared vision, the more God gives fruit to our efforts. That is obvious of course, and theologically obvious – God calls us to be the church together, not in any way separate, isolated or on our own. Work with each other, and not in isolation. We work well when we work as a team in our local church or in the diocese.

And that also mean paying deliberate and intentional attention to our diversity – with whom are we working together? Do we reflect the wider population? Are we genuinely and openly inclusive, seeking to learn about and include people who live among us and are richly different from us?

The second point I'd like to make is that the church exists for the sake of others. So our efforts and struggles, our arguments and our celebrations, are all for the sake of the people of Suffolk and for us to better proclaim by word and deed the good news of Jesus Christ for them. This is what we are for.

One of the reasons I was viscerally attracted to this post was that there clearly remained a strong connection between church and local community, a strong mission connection.

That was borne out in the pandemic – when Mike and I went round to deaneries after the first lockdown, we asked where you had seen God at work. The answer was utterly consistent everywhere: in worship and in service.

Through the pandemic we rediscovered just how important our worship was, when we could no longer use our churches, and we found ways to worship we had not imagined were possible before – God was in that.

And we found ourselves helping the isolated and lonely, the sick and the distressed, those struggling in so many ways. "We have turned outwards" people said to Mike and me. "We have found our vocation once again as a church in this community". This has continued during the cost-of-living crisis and the ongoing struggles of so many in our communities. Our strength lies in that double commitment, two sides of the same coin, worship and service. Loving God and loving our neighbour.

So let me touch on a few more things where I think we have worked well together and made progress. When I arrived there was an immense gulf of trust between parishes and the diocesan office and I am forever grateful to a succession of staff and colleagues who have turned that around. Of course we have to continue to work on this and we do, recognising it is a cultural issue.

The role of bishop and bishop's office, and of the diocesan office is to serve. In very recent times, I am immensely grateful to Gary Peverley for agreeing to step up to the Diocesan Secretary role and for being the very embodiment of openness and servant-heartedness that has helped bridge the gap between the "diocese" and the local church. Yes, we have more work to do – but we are a long way on from where we were.

I spoke in 2015 about the huge financial challenge we faced. In that address I said, despite the efforts of many,

"we still have one of the absolute worst financial pictures of any diocese in the Church of England, and it is a chronic, structural crisis. It is huge, and it will bring the diocese to its knees, so let's get on our knees before that happens and pray for wisdom."

That's one of the other reasons I was attracted to this role – I love a challenge! I thank God for the transformation that has taken place. It is remarkable, and while we are not out of the woods by any means, we are no longer overwhelmed by the financial state as we were when I arrived. This again has been achieved by working together and a spirit of service.

Evidence for our transformation – three examples – first, we broke even in 2019; secondly, despite the huge projected deficit of £1.8m in the first year of the pandemic, 2020, and yes, with a chunky grant from the Church Commissioners of £800,000, we broke even again – and you will remember that was the fruit of committed prayer across the diocese, and acts of generosity by individuals and parishes. Third, Justin Welby said to me the other day, “Eds and Ips is not one of the dioceses I worry about anymore.”

Now we have a great deal of work to do, and that was why I set the funding of the diocese as one of my four priorities for my last eighteen months in post. We have a working group that is looking at a range of ways in which funding at the local level and more broadly can be enhanced, and I expect a clear plan to emerge before I step out of this post. I am immensely grateful to Edward Creasey, as chair of the DBF.

We are nearly there, and I am hugely grateful to all those in the diocesan office who work on giving and to Tim Holder, our Director of Engagement, who is helping us think creatively and communicate clearly about our finances, amongst a host of other things. It is about clear communication, about inviting people to help, about building partnerships, including social enterprise, and a host of other developments, and above all about prayer that fires us with the vision that this is for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel.

The church’s finances are part of her spiritual life, flowing from prayer. How we handle and engage with our material resources is shaped by our relationship to God. Our financial priorities embody our spiritual priorities. And that is true just as much for us as individuals, and our giving. We need to be more comfortably talking about money.

Back in 2015 I told you I gave to the church 5% of my gross income, and I named the figure, and then I gave 5% to other causes. That has been my and Jutta’s spiritual commitment since we were married. I now give through the brilliant Parish Giving Scheme, nearly 7% of my gross stipend, and a similar amount to a host of other causes.

We are all pressed, but some of us who are less pressed than others can step up for the sake of everyone else and for the ministry of the church in this diocese. I give not to pay the bills, but out of gratitude for all I have received, and frankly, because I believe that is the least the Lord requires of me.

Now I know that, tied with money, in all our minds are two other dimensions crucial to the life of this diocese. The first is church buildings. I am absolutely thrilled that thanks to the work of Lucy de la Casas, newly in post, building on the huge work that Archdeacon David has done on church buildings, and with Dawn Gillet on parsonages, Edmund Harris on church building, and James Roll on carbon net zero, we have a clear and strong integrated plan emerging.

This will help us support those who are struggling to care for our church buildings, give us a prioritised route map for carbon net zero, and help us step up the care for our parsonages. I am immensely grateful that we have now reached a point that early next year you will be able to consider a comprehensive plan. It doesn’t solve everything, but it gets us a lot farther forward and it is once again about being joined up.

With money we think about clergy. But get it the right way round – what clergy do we need, and now find the money. It has been clear to me from the beginning that we must not cut clergy posts and – nor indeed close churches. Our national vision is a Christian presence in every community, which we here express as “flourishing congregations making a difference.” You can’t do that and cut posts. My own sense indeed is that dioceses that have cut posts to save money are in much the same financial state now as they were before they cut.

Now I find myself over and again reflecting on Jesus sending out the seventy in Luke’s gospel (10: 1-24). It has become a key text for me as to how we are called to work, serve and minister in Suffolk and I encourage you to reflect on it too. Jesus sends the 70 out in pairs, for a start.

Mike and I inadvertently, in that we had not planned it, but found ourselves called to do just that – to be a pair together serving the people and churches of this county. And I know that working together with others is far more fruitful for any of us than struggling on our own – believe me, right now I feel that!

And Jesus tells the 70 to pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest, and so we do – we pray for people to be stirred by the Spirit to offer themselves for all sorts of roles and ministries across our churches and diocese. In this diocese we are bucking the national trend, and our ordinand numbers continue to be strong. We are not seeing the dramatic fall off in vocations we are seeing across the country.

I know why – because we have a great vocations team led by Stuart Batten and we have developed a strong culture of lay and ordained vocations. Our auxiliary ordination pathway is part of that and I have ordained some 70 people through that route – 70 more self-supporting clergy than there would have been without it. And, incidentally, unintentionally, it has provided a small pipeline of clergy moving into stipendiary roles. And the growth in ordained vocations has been more than matched by a proliferation of lay vocations.

And then Jesus tells the seventy, the harvest is plentiful. We believe that. Which is why we have Inspiring Ipswich and Growing in God in the Countryside. Both of these projects have borne immense fruit, and I am immensely grateful to Archdeacons Rhiannon and Sally for their leadership in these projects.

We continue to learn the lessons from them, what is working and what is not, as we look to what future investments of national church funding should look like.

Let me jump forward in that passage from Luke, the sending out of the 70, to the point where they return. We read, “The seventy returned with joy” and Jesus gathered them around him and they told him what had happened and what wonderful ways God had been present in all they did. This is so important, to celebrate, to share and give thanks for all that God is doing among us.

I see this in the gatherings we have for the auxiliary ordination pathway, every fortnight in my house, of the new deacons, every month, of the new priests, once a term, of training

incumbents, of rural deans and lay chairs, of pioneers and church planters. I see this in gatherings of church wardens, and treasurers and elders.

I see this in our diocesan Suffolk Ministry Development Programme which is frankly brilliant and everyone who takes parts says so. It's such a strong example of our "working together" culture that is at the heart of who we are as a diocese and I am hugely grateful to Archdeacon Rich for his leadership of this, and so much else he does with supporting our lay and ordained ministers.

So there are so many occasions when those exercising ministry – sent out into the harvest – come back and share their stories – and Jesus of course is always in the midst of those gatherings. And I have never heard anyone say, "God is not active where I am". Every single occasion, every single person, speaks about the work of God in their lives, in the ministry they exercise, in the communities in which we serve. God is with us. Of that we can be absolutely certain.

The fourth area and my fourth priority for my closing phase with you is engagement with young people.

I have been so thrilled to see the engagement of young people in faith that we have seen through our schools. This has been hugely encouraging and I'm particularly grateful to Jane Sheat for her leadership in The Flourish programme which draws together schools and parishes, a project bearing fruit.

I have given a great deal of my time and what you might call my convening role to bring together leaders concerned with the flourishing of all young people across the county, and I remain committed to that. But one of the challenges for all of us is how we engage further with young people and faith and in particular teenagers and faith, and I am in awe of what is happening in a number of our parishes. And I was hugely heartened by news from Sharron Coburn that we are embarking on a partnership with Youthscape to work with clergy across the diocese to help develop programmes that will help clergy and laity in this vital ministry.

So themes from 2015 and for the future – strengthening finance, sustaining buildings, supporting ministry and engaging young people. And two overarching themes – working together and building trust. We have come a long way by God's grace, and I can see the fruit in our deepening trust in God and our confidence in ourselves and in one another.

But let me finish to say there is one thing that is vital your next Bishop has. Besides a sense of humour and an ever thickening skin. Love. They must have love. I have learned that this is really only and all about love. Love of God with heart, mind and soul, and then a call to love the people of this county in all their wonderful rich diversity, to love our churches and communities, to love our enterprise and our tradition, to love our love and landscapes, in a word, a call to fall in love with Suffolk.

Thank you.