

Bishop's Charge to the 61st Synod of the Diocese of Edmonton
The Right Rev. Jane Alexander

We celebrate the opening of this synod on the eve of the Feast of St. Luke and we have used those readings. They seemed particularly appropriate for us tonight. Jesus returns from his baptism in the Jordan to preach his first sermon back home. Jesus reads Isaiah's vision of a year lived in such a way that it is acceptable in God's sight. Then he proclaims that the time for such a Jubilee year has arrived here and now. If you were to read on you would hear that the service in the synagogue comes to an abrupt ending as the people attempt to get rid of Jesus by deciding whether the best idea will be to stone him or to throw him off a cliff. We will, I trust, hope for a slightly less dramatic conclusion to the bishop's charge, so don't any of you get any ideas.

In this charge I will tell you how things look to me in the Diocese and comment a little on things further abroad, I will share some ideas for how we might proceed. During the course of the synod there will be chances for feedback and indeed on the back page of the charge, which you will receive at the end of the service, there are a series of questions to take back to your parishes for discussion and more feedback. You see, we really are in this mission together and through the grace of God we will decide on our path together. SO here we go.

First I have to say that I am encouraged by your very presence here this evening; you are a group of people who care about the church and its mission. A great preacher William Willimon said to his congregation that "You are here, (in church) not because you are searching but because you have been sought, called, summoned. You are here because God has reached in, grabbed you, put you here, enticed, wooed, allured you here. So Christianity is not so much a religion of discovery. It is a religion of revelation. The long search is over. You have been found. This is the good news." I really agree with him, we have been caught and now it is our turn to share the good news.

So we ask ourselves is this good news something worth sharing – I hope that we would all agree that it is. Is this good news central to our lives, is it something that calls us to action?

If you throw the phrase 'maintenance to mission' into Google you get 36 million hits. But if you throw in 'Anglican' the number drops to 207,000! So it seems as if our topic for synod is one that has caught attention before – does that mean that it is a 'has been' topic, should we ignore the call and rush for the next catch phrase – no.

The subtitle for us is the courage to ask and imagine – because as brothers and sisters in Christ you and I are called to a particular ministry in this diocese and it is going to take a lot of courage. You need that courage right now to look with me at how things stand.

As you can see from Appendix 6 in your Synod circulars, the figures and graphs presented do not necessarily represent a period of transforming growth. There was a

surge in attendance in the middle of this period when average Sunday attendance increased by about 450 per Sunday but we have since lost all that. If 2008 continues the trends seen over the past years we can expect to see a further decrease in attendance. Out of 58 parish points, 35 parishes are declining to a lesser or greater extent. Over the last 5 years we have seen a significant decline in attendance in 13 parishes and only 3 parishes have seen a significant increase. 36 of our parishes report no youth and 16 report no Sunday school with another 21 reporting significant decline. We have to look and ask hard questions. Whether we like it or not the time to act is right now. Do not look down hearted please; I ask you to dig really deep and find the courage to say “What a great opportunity” “What a chance for growth.” You see, I believe we are in a time of great opportunity, we have the freedom to let go of all the things that have not worked and to look ahead.

Our figures in the diocese do not paint a picture of a church filled with life and growing – but they could do. We could start the turn around right here, today. The 2009 picture could be completely different. Can we do it? Of course we can. We can do all things in Christ who strengthens us, and it is in His name that we minister. When the Diocese focused on stewardship through education and diocesan gatherings there was a tremendous response. So we know that when we focus our energies we can make things happen. I call us now, to a time of honest review, to consider our own lives and parishes and to take courage. Within our diocesan and parish structure we can decide to do some things differently if we are to fulfill our mission here in the Diocese. Mission is transformational, full of risk. What does that mean for us?

In this diocese it doesn't mean putting someone else's plans in place. We have to discern what God is calling us to do. With all the wonderful work that has been done on mission including the Mission shaped church resources from the UK, our job is not to duplicate someone else's good ideas but to find our good ideas. I am sure that every single person here this evening has at least one good idea. To inspire us to look at our own good ideas I am delighted to welcome Nick Brotherhood from the Institute of Evangelism to speak to us about Fresh Expressions.

We don't need a new mission statement, “Proclaiming the Gospel, Making Disciples and Furthering the Kingdom” still works. It's not finished. We can keep doing it and in some areas we can start doing it. It is the mission of the church. I believe it was Mark Twain who said "Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand." That's the same with the mission of the church – we don't have to sit and wonder what it could be, we know it. We have received the great commission from Christ himself. *And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'* (Matthew 28:18-20.)

We are invited to take part in the great plans of God and to trust him with our whole lives – warts and all. We don't give back the great commission or think it does not apply to each one of us. We all are called to say yes to God's plans and then to ask "where do I fit in?"

We are delighted to welcome Dean Peter Elliott to this synod. Peter is the chair of the 2019 Visioning and Planning Task Group of General Synod. He will talk to us about how we and other Anglicans across the country are being invited to "help shape the mission priorities" for the next decade.

This seems a good moment in the charge to talk about General Synod, especially as we meet tonight for our first diocesan business synod since the General Synod meeting of 2007. During the election process I said what I felt the achievements of that synod had been, and I reiterate some of them now with some addenda.

The national church reaffirmed its commitment to the work of the Council of the North. In Edmonton, Council of the North dioceses are our neighbours and this is a huge mission field right here. In fact a team of youth from one of our parishes undertook a mission trip to Saskatchewan this past summer. **I wonder if each parish in the Diocese of Edmonton would be at the very least, prayer partners with a Council of the North parish.** I am so pleased to welcome Fiona Brownlee to this synod to update us on the work and dreams of the Council of the North. I am also thrilled that we will take part in the Amazing Grace project, so keep some voice for our rendition of Amazing Grace which we will sing at the end of this service as we begin our synod session. The house of Bishops sang it at Lambeth a few times – I have to say I know we can do this!

We affirmed our promise to walk together with our First Nations brothers and sisters. I am pleased to say that our Indigenous Bishop, Mark MacDonald has visited the Diocese a number of times and we have some new initiatives in the area of healing and outreach under discussion.

We celebrated our relationship with our full communion Lutheran partners the ELCIC (Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada). I continue to work closely with Bishop Ron and to look at possible partnerships for ministry in our dioceses.

We saw the public commitment of the church to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which include ending extreme poverty and hunger and combating HIV/AIDS and malaria, and promoting gender equality. During Lambeth, the Bishops walked in support of the MDGs and we have all been asked to keep these alive in our dioceses, through our actions and our advocacy. **I invite you all to think about how your parish is supporting the MDGS.** I know that when we looked at this at All Saints' we were amazed at just how much ministry fit with the goals. Many of you, I am sure, are taking part in "Stand Up" events this weekend associated with the Make Poverty History campaign.

But of course, our last General Synod left us with many questions as to how we continue to have conversations around the issue of the blessing of same sex unions. These questions went into the heart of discussions at the Lambeth conference this summer. In a couple of weeks the House of Bishops will meet to discuss our responses to the proposed Anglican Covenant. I hope that we will be able to find a way forward and that our discussions will be Spirit-led and Spirit-filled. **It is my intention to have a series of deanery gatherings and then a diocesan gathering through the Spring and Fall of 2009 to prepare for the discussions at General Synod 2010.** These discussions will be hard for all of us; they will involve gracious listening, a willingness to grapple with thorny issues and to discuss interpretation of scripture – and we will not be naïve because we know that we all interpret scripture in various ways, every single one of us. **I expect vigorous theological debate in an atmosphere of mutual respect, we are truly pilgrims and although different views are held, we look to see Christ revealed in one another.**

In addition, we have been asked by General Synod to talk about the theology of marriage. Our discussions will call us to consider what it means to be in a faithful relationship. We know that love is a gift of God. **We will consider what it means for the church to have something to say about sexual faithfulness, adultery, abuse, pornography and addictions.** We will need to consider our place in the communion, our understanding of the covenant and the proposed moratoria. Above all things we must be careful that the current debate on human sexuality does not become idolatrous.

So what is the Mission of the church right here in Edmonton?

The report “Mission-shaped church” said, “God’s missionary purposes are cosmic in scope, concerned with the restoration of all things, the establishment of Shalom, the renewal of creation and the coming of the Kingdom as well as the redemption of fallen humanity and the building of the church” ^[1] That’s a tall order! Obviously we are not, and cannot be, a one issue church, whatever we prioritize that issue as being, and we all prioritize, let us be courageously honest about that.

Let’s look at the mission – how it might be for the next couple of years. As I said before, we have some specific challenges ahead of us, we are facing a general drop in attendance, we have to make some decisions about how we can continue to be the church in rural communities that can no longer afford full- or even half-time priestly ministry; we are seeing a growth in population in the diocese but not a growth in Anglicans; we need to look at evangelism and we have some specific problems in reaching children and youth.

The issues we face are faced by dioceses and provinces throughout the communion. The church of England published the report Mission Shaped Church in 2004 and this has been followed by Fresh Expressions to resource and encourage new ways of

^[1] p85 The Mission Shaped Church, Church House Publishing 2004.

being church - “a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church” [2]

We know that Mission is intentional, we cannot be accidental missionaries. From looking at a great deal of literature I am convinced that over the next few years we must consider how we are going to be a truly missional community. This will involve an inclusive action plan which will include excellence in our Traditional parishes; Reboots of existing ministry that is under-equipped; Fresh expressions of church; New church plants; and vibrant Chaplaincies. Whatever it is, we must do everything the very best that we can. One size will not fit all, it never has and it never will, but we must be sure that what we offer to God through our ministry in the church is our very best.

We cannot ‘decide’ to be a small parish and to stay that way because it is what makes us feel comfortable. Christ does not call us to be comfortable or to ignore the many people who may live mere blocks from our churches who have never heard the message of the gospel.

If we are to look ahead then I believe that here in the Diocese of Edmonton we must acknowledge what already works, celebrate our strengths, embrace what has proven effective across denominations – a combination of the proven and the innovative.^[3]

We have to admit that evangelism is not our greatest gift. I say that because we have at least two situations where we have not been successful in evangelizing neighbourhoods and have rented space to other Christian fellowship groups who have gone on to do an amazing job and have quite large, healthy and vibrant congregations. Instead of thinking of the reasons why we didn’t manage it - there is no blame here - let’s find out how we could be more successful in the future. Don’t get me wrong, I am very pleased that through these other communities people have come to Christ, but I refuse to believe that we can’t be just as successful in our mission to make disciples.

Our proclamation is rooted in Christ where we find the power of life and change. Are we trying to keep Christ locked inside our churches? 2 Corinthians 5:17, *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* Do we consider ourselves new creations in Christ?

It is a risky business. I was talking to a young adult who has left the Anglican church about two weeks ago. He said that he liked the church but that he really didn’t know what we were about, so when he wanted answers and direction he felt lost. I was sad that he had not found the people to answer his questions. I have invited him to keep talking to me – I don’t know if he will take me up on the offer but whether I have the answers or not I am called by my own baptismal promises to offer to talk.

[2] Page xv *Mission Shaped Youth: Rethinking young people and church*. Sudworth, T., Cray, G., Ruseel, C., Church House Publishing. 2007

[3] Page xii ‘Reclaiming the Great Commission’ Payne, C & Beazley, H. Jossey-Bass Publishers. 2001

In order to proclaim the gospel – we need to know the gospel, to study it, to live it –all of it not just the parts we like the best or the parts that further our plans. We need an incredibly deep understanding of scripture. In fact, we need to wrestle with the scriptures – it is meant to be work. There is a need for all of us to develop spiritually. As many of you know we have a large Natural Church Development (NCD) initiative in the diocese right now. And the features of most of our initial questionnaires in our parishes show that our two consistently lowest common factors are **Needs-Oriented Evangelism** and **Passionate Spirituality**. NCD has raised expectations in the Diocese and now we must find ways to resource and equip parishes and individuals as they seek to address the NCD results.

I am pleased that in partnership with other denominations we will be welcoming Thomas Keating to the Diocese in 2009. I am delighted to see the re emergence of the EFM – education for ministry program. I am pleased that we continue to work on our Lay Reader Program and I give thanks for the Cursillo community of Edmonton. We are encouraged to grapple with our faith where expressing any doubts or difficulties is encouraged, because it means we are committed to asking the HARDEST questions so we can continue to grow in faith.

The ACW asked me what my favourite scripture passage is – that’s a very difficult choice isn’t it? My choice is this one from Matthew 25.
“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

I mention this because scripture informs and guides my ministry and my life as a daughter of God. I hope that each one of us would have a passage of scripture that both challenges and encourages our Christian life.

For all of us here tonight, are we prepared to give these three powerful messages:

1. I have a faith by which I live
2. I am part of a community of faith
3. I am proud of my community of faith and believe that you could benefit from being part of it.^[4]

How can people tell from our words and actions that these three things are true? For each and every one of us here this evening this is personal. As disciples of Christ, this is for everyone. There are no let outs, no rain checks. Clergy and lay, rural and urban, old or young, it is the job of all of us to proclaim Christ.

Youth and children

At our synod in 2005 we identified a need to resource and develop children and youth ministries. It was part of our strategic plan and yet it has not happened. This is a critical area for us in the Diocese, our youth numbers are falling quite drastically. We have read in the Synod circular of the difficulties the TEC community is experiencing.

^[4] page 133 ‘Reclaiming the Great Commission’

We must turn this around. We have a core of faithful young people, They minister to us and with us. They volunteer at our camps. I've seen them at St. Faith's, at the Bissell Centre, and at the Mustard Seed. They go on retreats and mission trips. We must step up. Let's give them the tools they need to grow. Let them believe the words of Luke 11:9 ... *Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.* Recently, there have been some interesting new initiatives. I have been very happy to see some of the new work with Fusion in the diocese.

We are at a time in our society when we have what could be called a critical mass of young children and youth who are un-churched. Therefore we as a church need a new paradigm, new methods to reach out. We need to be absolutely sure what it is we are offering and why. **The #1 reason for reaching out to youth and children is that they come to know Jesus.** It's not about making sure we replace our eldest members with newer ones. We are not looking to maintenance, it is about discipleship. This is our task across all age groups but it is especially important with children and youth. Children's Sunday School attendance has declined by 19% across the diocese in the last 5 years. Some parishes are turning this around for which we give thanks to God. In some areas the nature of the community has changed so that we serve a different population now; that is particularly true in some rural areas. Can I ask that we get better at sharing? Can we speak to each other about what is working and see one another as precious resources?

It's not about facebook, myspace, blogs, flickr, webpages, powerpoints or praise bands in worship – those are all tools. Its about content, it's about discipleship. It's about helping people to discover who they are in Christ through relational ministry. We need to train and equip leaders and I believe we need to do it now. If we really want young people to be part of our church what are we prepared to do about it? It's personal, it requires commitment, responsibility and accountability. We need to ask "What have we done that has worked in the past?" "What are we doing that is working now?" And finally "What could we do?"

Ministry to Seniors and Shut-Ins

We also have some different challenges at the other end of the age scale. We have increasing numbers of seniors and shut-ins and this number will continue to grow. We need to look at how we continue to meet worship and sacramental needs of those who can no longer get to the parish celebrations of the Eucharist easily. We have **physical plant challenges** as a number of parishes seek to make their church buildings handicap accessible. We have specific ministry challenges as faithful brothers and sisters in Christ become more house-bound. I will always be indebted to the work of parish pastoral teams and to our hospital visitors and chaplains. But it would be timely for us to look at increasing our pastoral ministry through **clergy and lay teams**. **Pastoral care training** across the spectrum needs care and attention. I can only speak for myself, but it is my greatest joy and privilege to assure the people I meet that at all times they are loved by God and that each of our names is written in the palm of God's hand. I believe that all of us here today are called to do this.

Furthering the Kingdom

As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."
Matthew 10:7.

Some of the places where I have seen the Kingdom of heaven are on our inner city streets, breakfast programs, Christian care centres, youth missions to other dioceses, Vacation Bible School programs in the north, our own camps for children, many of whom would not have a Christian camp experience if it were not for scholarships to attend Camp Come Alive. I see the kingdom of God in one of our teenagers who makes muffins for the George Spady centre every single week; in the provision of a tractor, a well, in farm animals and clinics for people in countries we may never visit; in SOMA^[5] missions to simply 'be' with people getting their lives back after incredible trauma. I see it in a mission to Haiti, in a community Fall supper. I see the kingdom of God drawing near in our international internships, and I see it in the work of the ACWs throughout the diocese. The Kingdom is here my friends. It is not hidden, it is right in front of us calling us again and again to be a part of it. In each of these situations I have mentioned and in the ones buzzing in your brains, things you see in your own parishes and communities we are called to ask ourselves – what does this action say about God? We must remember that "any form of hospitality on the premises of a church is an affirmative witness to the community of faith."^[6]

Where is God's love needed in our neighbourhood? Are there elderly people who need us to visit? Are there young families who need to be welcomed into a new community, who need programs for their children, who need nurturing in the faith? Are there young people who need purpose in their lives? Are there people who need food or shelter? Are there people who need to hear the good news that we have to share? Do we need to find a way to invite them into our church family? We must look to our presence across all communities and I think we should consider that three of the largest and most active Canadian forces bases are in our diocese; Edmonton, Cold Lake and Wainwright. What is our ministry among military families?

How might we look further afield as a Diocese? We have been invited by the Bishop of Buye Diocese in Burundi, Bishop Sixbert Macumi, to partner with that diocese and I anticipate inviting Bishop Macumi to come and visit us in 2009 to explore this partnership. I believe they have much to teach us about evangelism and we have much to offer them too. There is a brochure in your packages that gives more information on this initiative.

Rural Ministry

I have already touched on some of the specific challenges in rural Alberta. The shape of our rural communities is very varied depending on agricultural situations, economic and industry variables. There are communities which are dying and ones which are reinventing themselves. As a diocese, what is our role, our presence now, and what will it be in the future? I am so pleased that in the south east of our diocese groups of lay

^[5] SOMA - (Sharing of Ministries Abroad) is an Anglican based mission agency with a worldwide vision: to see Christians of all churches renewed in the Holy Spirit in all nations of the world.

^[6] page140 'Reclaiming the Great Commission'

people from a number of small communities are meeting on a monthly basis to work on a ministry plan for their area in the years ahead - a ministry plan that will deal with population shifts and look at some ecumenical collaborations. Some rural parishes have done incredible work in identifying and encouraging the gifts of their congregations and in developing ministry teams. I believe there is also opportunity for some **rural/urban partnerships** between parishes in the Diocese which could involve a **sharing of resources and of prayer support**. As I travel around the diocese I think we do not always know one another very well, which makes it hard for us to understand the different contexts in which we minister.

In order for the diocese to be a collegial resource filled community, I believe that as a Diocese we need to think about how we plan and build for the future and aid the ministries we have. We have looked at aided ministry in the past, but I would like to attach a different label to the ministry and to change focus so that we pull ourselves out of Maintenance and into Mission. Therefore, I would like to see the development of what I am calling the **Barnabas Initiative**. This initiative is one of encouragement and support. I think we need a resource team – not to provide centralized ministry, far from it, but to exist so that across the diocese we can provide extra input in developing and equipping ministry. Some of this may take the form of something new and sometimes it is to bring about renewal and growth in an existing parish or ministry.

I want to say a word about apportionment, especially in the light of the new initiatives I think we must undertake in the Diocese. Apportionment gives us a sense of being together as a family and owning larger pieces of ministry and vision than we can often do as individual parishes. The Anglican church functions as a synodical diocesan structure, it cries out to us to really be a family, to be a larger unit. That means we must trust one another and have a shared vision for our future together. Apportionment is not a tax, it is an invitation. I thank all of the members of the parishes across the Diocese who have accepted the invitation to be part of ministry outside their parish boundaries.

All of us must believe that we are living examples of the power of the Christian life. We are to be disciples who make disciples. Our faith is not about us. In 2013 we will celebrate our centennial as a diocese, that's under 5 years away now. SO it occurs to me that as part of this charge I should share with you at least some of my dream for how we might celebrate this anniversary.

Last year we had roughly eleven and a half thousand people on our parish rolls in the diocese but our average Sunday attendance was less than half that number. What if by 2013 we can have made such a difference that people who identify themselves as Anglican and appear on our parish rolls are more regularly attending church for worship and to share in the Holy Sacraments? I think that's a good goal. It is 100% achievable but will require all of us to commit to it. Ministry is not rocket science, but it is dependant upon our wills and our actions.

Here is my other goal – that each Anglican in this diocese brings another person to Christ within the next 5 years. Could we do that? If you think you could – that's great,

if you think you can't, would you agree to work with others so we can learn how together? That's what it might mean to make disciples, don't you think. To actually help people find a way into a relationship with Jesus Christ that transforms their lives, and for them to find that way through our Anglican communities here in this diocese.

A last word from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians chapter 4, the Message translation *My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God.*

Amen

