BISHOP’S ADDRESS TO SYNOD 2015

Members of Synod

Our Diocesan Synod this year marks a number of significant moves forward – and a number of significant challenges for us both as diocese and as a church.

A few moments ago, we welcomed a number of new clergy to the diocese. And there are some important appointments to come over the next few months. I want to say again to them how welcome they are and how much they are already contributing to our life. We now have in place substantial support for clergy who come in ministry to this diocese – that is part of our work in Clergy Development. Of those changes, I want to mention particularly the significance of the Church Graft in the former ABI Group – now called All Saints, Fife. This initiative is under the leadership of Revd Dean Norby and in partnership with the congregation at P’s and G’s in Edinburgh. This is one of those God-given opportunities which we either take or miss. I want to applaud the courage of all involved.

That leads me to mention the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury in October. This was part of his tour of every province in the Anglican Communion – an attempt to get to know the Primates in particular and to carry forward one of his ministry priorities which is reconciliation. As well as visits to other parts of the SEC, he had lunch with our clergy and he visited Aberdour to affirm Dean Norby and the three congregations who are part of the church graft. Archbishop Justin went away encouraged – I met him shortly afterwards and he described what he saw as a church ‘fizzing with life’

Today we mark in our worship the start of Revd Thomas Brauer’s ministry as Diocesan Missioner. Thomas comes to us as a gift from the world church – I met his former bishop, Jane Bishop of Edmonton in Canada last week. Thomas was drawn here by the quality of the University of St Andrews. He earned the respect of our clergy by taking on the Central Fife Group and his ministry there has been transformative. He will now continue to develop our work in mission and he will speak briefly when we come to the Report of the Diocesan Mission Committee. I want to thank the Administration Board and the Standing Committee for the work which has enabled this appointment to be made.

Thomas’ appointment represents new leadership for the missional life of our diocese. I want to thank all those who have sustained the work of Casting the Net in recent years. The commitment which has been given has been remarkable and what has been achieved has transformed many aspects of our life together.

During the year, we have been part of the Cascade Process of conversation on issues of Human Sexuality. We sent seven representatives to the Conference which launched the Cascade Process in Pitlochry – that in turn has resulted in three sessions in the diocese and I am sure that more will take place at congregational level. During the year, same-sex marriage became legal in Scotland and for the first time the church finds itself out of step with the civil law. During the next few years we need to decide how we shall respond to that situation. You don’t need me to remind you of the sensitivity of the issue and its potential to divide churches and the Anglican Communion itself.

The purpose of the Cascade Process has been to create an open space – a safe space – for honest conversation across difference. It’s a space for people to speak and be heard rather than a place for deciding.

The question of how our church will decide its position on these issues is in the hands of the Provincial Faith and Order Board. The Board has yet to determine exactly what will happen at General Synod 2015. But it is likely that General Synod will receive and discuss a substantial paper on the Doctrine of Marriage. Subsequently, there will probably be a discussion on possible changes to the Canons of our Church. If we can find agreement on a way forward – and remember that we are a diverse church in a diverse Communion – then a process of canonical change may follow in subsequent years. Any proposals will need to command wide support – the requirement for canonical change is that proposals should receive two thirds majorities in each of the three houses of Synod – laity, clergy and bishops.

As an interim measure, the College of Bishops issued some Guidelines which set out our view on the current situation when, as I said, the church finds itself out of step with the Civil Law.

If you read between the lines of what I have been saying, you will realise that this has been a particularly demanding period. The Dean and I have weathered many a storm together and we have been deeply involved in the many appointment processes which are still ongoing. I want to thank him for his unfailing loyalty and support.

The issues around Human Sexuality test the life and leadership of every church. Inevitably my role as Primus in giving leadership to our church is particularly demanding at present. Beyond that, I am honoured to represent our church – and to represent you – in many other places and contexts. I continue to serve as a member of the Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion and I am Convenor of the Anglican Communion’s Continuing Indaba movement – that is the movement which replicates our Cascade Process across the Anglican Communion. During the year, I was appointed by Archbishop Justin to be the Co-Chair for the Anglican Communion of a dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the World Communion of Reformed Churches. I suspect that that decision was made because of the key role which the Church of Scotland plays in that Communion. Last week I was in South Africa at a meeting of what came to be called Eco-Bishops at the invitation of Archbishop Thabo, Primate of Southern Africa. It is easy to represent Scotland around the world. We are built into the history of many churches, people and places. We are welcome everywhere. We are seen as having played a founding role in the Anglican Communion and, although I wouldn’t say this outside Scotland, our values as a church are close to the values which make the Anglican Communion the remarkable body which it is.

In sustaining what is a fairly hectic pace, I am particularly grateful for the support of Alicia and Leanne. They have become skilled at not quite saying where I am – and they know that they should never use the word busy – and particularly not ‘too busy’.

I look forward now to a fascinating period in which with energy renewed we move forward together. And may God bless us in our service.