Members of Synod

I count it a privilege to be able to speak to you today – my tenth Diocesan Synod and the ninth year since I came to be part of the life of our diocese. There are many things which have happened in those years which I look back on with pleasure and thanksgiving. As a church, we have been becoming more confident in our place in the life of Scotland today. There are signs of real hope – for example the significant growth in the number of people being approved for training for ministry. In our diocese we have continued to develop Casting the Net – shaping our life in the direction of mission and growth. We have kept faith with the hope which emerged from the early Diocesan Review – that we would strive to be a church moving from decline to growth.

I want to say how grateful I have been for the personal kindness and prayerful support which has been shown to me during the year. It was only last summer that I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. My answer to the ‘How are you?’ question continues to be a hopeful but guarded ‘Well so far.’ Prayer has helped. The community of people with whom I have worked most closely at the centre of diocesan life joined me in a deep commitment to the ministry of prayer and healing. That meant a great deal to me.

During the last few years, we have used the afternoon session of our Diocesan Synod for conversation about mission – and today about Human Sexuality issues. The Scottish Episcopal Church, like all churches and faith communities, is trying to work out how to come to terms with rapid societal change in the area of same-sex relationships. The Scottish Parliament has now passed the Marriage and Civil Partnership [Scotland] Bill which legalises same sex marriage. So for the first time we shall be in a different place from what the state allows. We are also aware that one of the factors which most clearly defines attitudes on this issue is age. Older people have a range of responses – but younger people for the most part do not see same-gender relationships as a problem. So it becomes a serious missional issue.

My view is that we wasted a number of years talking about the Anglican Covenant when we should have been talking about this issue. We are now talking about it – in a whole church process of measured conversation which is being planned by a group led by Bishop Nigel of the Diocese of Brechin who will lead our thinking this afternoon. We are being invited to send seven representatives to a major conference of our church in the Atholl Palace Hotel on 29-30 April. We have only seven places – the conference is fully paid for – we shall have to choose. But if you think you would like to be part of it, I would be glad to hear from you. At the end of this year, we shall decide what action or movement would be appropriate to our church and what would be likely to have the support of the members.

We are passing through a time of remarkable change at the centre of diocesan life. In our diocesan staff, Caroline King our Casting the Net Officer left to train as a teacher and has been replaced on a part-time basis by Sarah Macmillan. We are very grateful to Caroline and to Sarah for their work with us. Sharon Peyton my PA will be leaving us at the end of this month. The loss of Sharon is particularly significant for me. She has been passionate about her work with us, she has formed strong relationships across the diocese and we shall miss her greatly. One other very significant change is the decision by Karen Gaskell to demit office as Convenor of the Congregational Growth Group. Much of the shaping of Casting the Net – particularly the Mission Action Planning has been Karen’s vision. Her commitment of time, energy and professional expertise has been extraordinary and we are very grateful to her.

Casting the Net continues to be our initiative in mission and growth. About half of our congregations have now completed Mission Action Planning. I have visited two congregations in the past fortnight where the process has engendered quiet transformation of congregational life. There are no easy or quick answers to the challenge of congregational growth – but congregations are growing in confidence and movement is happening. We are reshaping our Growing Disciples programme of Christian Education. We are working with leaders in children’s work and we have been developing shared training for clergy and their Vestries. Our work in Clergy Development has grown significantly and we hope that it is providing both support and training for our clergy. I say those things quickly – but they represent a huge effort being made with minimal resources. It is possibly only because of the commitment of many people.

Our focus on our own life is balanced by our focus on the world outside. I want to express again my thanks for the magnificent response of over £5000 to our Lent Appeal last year – for a programme of the Diocese of Calcutta among street children and for a Primary School which I visited in Kampala. We are discussing what our next initiative in our relationship with Calcutta might be and Canon Dom Ind will speak about that later in our Synod. I am delighted that Revd Swarup Bar, one of their clergy, will be assisting with worship in St John’s Alloa.

You probably were slightly taken aback by the drop in numbers in the roll of clergy this year. We are passing through a time of significant change in ministry in our congregations – the Dean and I are at present working on five appointments. There is good news in there. We shall have full time appointments in the Highland Perthshire Group centred on Pitlochry – and in the new Birnam and Stanley Grouping which you will hear about a little later. Beyond those five are interesting moves to follow – like the hope of a church plant or graft from P’s and G’s in Edinburgh in the ABI Group – giving us another full time ministry there. Some vacancies arise from clergy retirements. But others sadly arise from difficulties in ministry and from long term illness among clergy.

It’s hard to know what to say to you about all this. But I think I should offer you two responses.

The first is pastoral. One of the key roles of the bishop is to be the pastor of the clergy. I have always seen it as my task to help clergy to have fulfilling ministry. So I feel a sense of loss and some personal failure. I have always enjoyed ministry. To see stress and distress among clergy is deeply painful. I can see that members of Vestries and congregations who give their love and loyalty to their clergy feel at times upset and confused at what has happened. These issues are not unique to our diocese. Nor are they unique to our church.

The second of course is to say that this is partly about the times in which we live. Rapid change in society and rapid change in the church bring confusion of expectations of what clergy are for and what they can do. There are issues of formation – the term we use to describe the personal, spiritual and professional shaping of clergy for ministry. Those formation issues are being addressed in our own training programmes in the diocese – and through major changes in our patterns of training in the Scottish Episcopal Church. But I can see that clergy sometimes feel overwhelmed – perhaps feeling that what they represent doesn’t matter very much any more; or not quite knowing what to do; or feeling that they don’t have the skills they need.

In changing times, relationships matter greatly. We belong together. We are bravely addressing the challenges of ministry. Clergy need supportive and understanding relationships. The connection between clergy, Vestry, bishop and diocese is particularly important.

If you reflect on what I have shared with you today, you will find in it what is always present in the life of the church. There is progress and there is failure. There is joy and there is pain. There is brokenness and there is healing.

May God’s grace bring us new healing and strength for the next stages of the journey.