



BISHOP OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF OTTAWA

THE BISHOP'S CHARGE TO SYNOD – OCTOBER 2020

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all.

1 Thessalonians 1.1-7a

1 The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians was featured in our lectionary readings last Sunday (October 18, Proper 29C). This letter was written around 50 AD, and is probably the earliest one Paul wrote—and is quite likely the oldest document in the New Testament.

Paul is writing to Christians who had converted from other religions, and who were often harshly persecuted because of their decision to follow Jesus. Despite the hostility towards them, the baptized in Thessalonica persevered, holding to their convictions, and striving to serve with faith, hope and love.

Like many early Christians, they believed Jesus would return in their lifetime. As time dragged on they thought the return of Jesus was getting closer, and the anticipation and uncertainty was beginning to play on their minds. They were troubled about whether those who had already died would be lost when Jesus returned. Paul, who was clearly very fond of them, writes in a gentle and understanding manner, and explains to them the vast expanse of God's love, and how everyone will eventually meet again in Christ, and will be together with him forever.

Echoing the teaching of Jesus, Paul tells the baptized not to be concerned or worried about the future, and to focus instead on "being children of the light and children of the day." Put on the armour of faith, hope and love, he says, and "encourage one another and build one another up."

Paul's letter to a beleaguered church is filled with encouragement and hope. He reminds us that even when the world is a bit overwhelming, and threatens to "quench the Spirit," we will find peace and purpose when we choose to be "imitators" of Jesus.

2 I have said COVID 19 is a teacher and a revealer. The pandemic has made us see many things through new eyes. We have seen how those of us who live in long-term care, with little provision for privacy or protection, can suffer and die in grossly disproportionate numbers.

We have also seen how those of us who are homeless lose the most basic comforts when there is a lockdown; and how those of us who live with poverty in meagre housing can't easily go online or make a call to stay connected.

God is with us as this pandemic runs its course, causing us to see how greed and exploitation cause great harm, and how compassion and wisdom cause great healing.

I pray these pandemic days will guide us more deeply into the experience of those among us who always live with restrictions.

I pray it will teach those of us who have wealth, health, and power to seek greater justice for those of us who are kept in poverty by remarkably unfair welfare systems; who are elderly, isolated and vulnerable; or who are unable to find income, housing, health, or food security.

I pray this pandemic will help us see that these issues of justice and inclusion have demonstrably achievable and beneficial solutions—if they are courageously embraced by our politicians and supported by the public.

3 When we drew upon our collective resources during April and May to give our parishes relief from paying into our shared costs during the pandemic lockdown, we felt how strong we are together.

When we rose to the challenges of staying connected and offering pastoral care, fellowship and worship in new and creative ways in our parish ministries, and when our community ministries rapidly pivoted and adjusted to continue serving sisters and brothers who are vulnerable, we felt how resilient and determined we are when it comes to imitating the expansive love of Christ.

That strength, resilience and determination will see us through this public health crisis and will serve us well in the months and years afterwards. The pandemic has heightened our need to be cohesive, creative and profoundly faithful.

Accordingly, I want us all to adopt a new, intentional way of speaking about our life together. We need to fully embrace what it means to be an Anglican diocese with two vital expressions of service to our God and our world.

We are a diocesan church and we have parish ministries and community ministries.

Our clergy are appointed to serve alongside our lay leaders and our people in parish ministries. Our executive directors and line employees join in partnerships with others to serve vulnerable brothers and sisters in community ministries.

We are all served by our senior staff and staff from a house named after the thoughtful 2nd Bishop of Ottawa, John Charles Roper.

Please do your very best to speak of our common life as a diocesan church in this way. To do otherwise, to perpetuate a bad habit of treating our diocese as a “thing” or as a street address is self-defeating and destructive. We have been entrusted with the mission of being the body of

Christ and we live this out as a church called the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa—which is us, together, lay and ordained, the baptized who are called to be imitators of Christ in the world.

4 As we move forward as a diocesan church, I will lift up our four recently reviewed and refreshed strategic priorities: 1) communications; 2) the shape of parish ministry and buildings; 3) engagement with the world; and 4) lifelong formation, worship and hospitality. I intend to focus us on fully addressing these strategic priorities in a timely and disciplined manner.

I have established two new episcopal panels to address our first and second priorities concerning communications and the shape of parish ministry.

The Communications Panel is preparing a comprehensive strategic communications plan, and a member of our senior staff will provide operational direction to its implementation. The pandemic has caused us to more fully embrace a range of communication technologies, and, in time, the panel will review what worked well during the days of being physically apart, and to draw from it the best platforms and methods to help us communicate more effectively between ourselves—and from ourselves to the world around us. There is much to be learned, and much to be gained at this time.

The second panel, called the Shape of Parish Ministry Consultation Team, is planning diocesan-wide consultations regarding urgent questions about the shape of our parish ministries, leading to consensus decisions by synod concerning where God is calling us to be, and how we can creatively use our collective resources to thrive and serve. We all need to participate in the success of our parish ministries as a whole, not simply in our own parishes.

We are undoubtedly called to change the shape of our parish ministries. We will come to see that we are called to close some buildings and to create new ways of including everyone in parish ministry. We will also come to see that we are called to build new buildings in new places—and we will see that we have the collective resources to buy land, construct creative structures, and populate them with skilled clergy and lay teams who can build new congregations.

Just as our community ministries continue to venture into new areas and adapt to new circumstances with excellence and optimism, so can our parish ministries.

Wherever we feel called as a diocesan church to close a building, it is my duty to ensure everyone will continue to be part of a parish. We may leave some of our buildings, but we must never leave one another. Whatever shape our parish ministries take, clergy and lay leaders must share in making sure no one thinks their church has abandoned them, or has been disrespectful of the buildings and sacred objects they, and their forebears, cherished.

I pray congregations who know in their hearts that the time has come to close the doors of their church will courageously reach out to me sooner rather than later, so I can provide guidance, and help to ensure all their members continue to be cared for and participate meaningfully in the life of our diocesan church.

5 When we are able to meet in person as a synod, I will request that the agenda be structured around all four of our strategic priorities, so we can all see how they are being seriously looked at, and can share in developing them further.

Between this virtual synod and then, I will be asking Diocesan Council to instruct our Governance Committee to undertake a governance review. In particular, parts of our committee structure are no longer adequately suited to supporting and achieving our third and fourth strategic priorities, related to engagement with the world and lifelong formation, worship and hospitality. As the world around us changes, we need to build our capacity to educate and equip ourselves to engage in proactive, Christ-like ways, often in partnership with others.

For example, I am conscious that our heightened awareness of racism needs to be accompanied by both education and action; and I am concerned that we do not have in place a vehicle to enable us to be educated and equipped to engage in addressing the insidious and dehumanizing effects of racism. We must make spaces to hear sisters and brothers speak of how racism cuts into self-esteem, safety and opportunity.

A governance review will help us to discern where we need to develop the means to engage more effectively with the world, and to ensure we are always growing into the full stature of Christ.

6 I am profoundly grateful to our clergy and lay leaders, our executive directors, and our senior staff for being responsive, diligent, careful and undaunted as we have formulated and implemented our pandemic plan. In the words of our advising epidemiologist, the Reverend Michael Garner, our lay and clergy leaders continue to bear the full weight of being “public health workers.”

I am deeply thankful for all the people of our diocese, who have, with good humour and generous spirits, supported the restrictions and changes which have been imposed.

This pandemic has caused hardship and loss, and it has not been easy for anyone. In some cases, it has meant taking on new and necessary tasks, and in other cases it has meant suppressing our pastoral and social instincts. This is stressful for we who are called to serve sacrificially, and who normally journey closely with one another.

Please take care of yourselves and one another, keeping things as simple as possible and setting a sustainable pace. Do what makes the most sense in your particular ministry context. Be sure to know when you are off duty, and fill those times with things that restore your body and mind. Stay healthy so you can serve others: there is nothing selfish about self-care.

As this global pandemic unfolds, and when it has passed, as it surely will, Saint Paul reminds us that we will find peace and purpose when we strive to live in the world in a Christ-like way—by trying hard to show his compassion, his kindness, his justice, and his healing in all we think and do and say, as individuals and as a diocesan church.

Be steadfast in faith, joyful in hope, and untiring in love, and the calming peace of Christ will be with you.

*The Right Reverend Shane A. D. Parker
Bishop of Ottawa*