



**Bishop's Charge to Synod  
June 2012  
Diocese of Nelson**

## **Bishop's Charge to Synod Diocese of Nelson 2012**

As every single one of you is aware, this Synod has come at a difficult time for Hilary and me. The date was chosen to enable us to have Synod early because of my Sabbatical that was going to happen later in the year.

The situation that we find ourselves in – Hilary's diagnosis of breast cancer and the subsequent treatment that we are in the middle of - certainly wasn't on the radar when the dates were set. And although it's been very hard to find the focus needed to produce this charge to Synod – there is also a sense in which God's timing is perfect. These past weeks have been a time of personal reassessment in which, among other things, the urgent has totally been replaced by the important.

But it has also come somewhere near the half-way point of my ministry as your Bishop – a natural time of reflection. As I looked back over the past 5 years I did a small exercise where I visualised two columns and in one I wrote all the things in these last five years that I am so thankful for – things that have given me hope. In the other column I wrote down the things that I regret – the things that have burdened me. And I became very aware that the things that had given me hope far outnumbered the things that had burdened me. It was totally out of proportion and far too much time was spent reacting to the issues that seemed to constantly arise within the Diocese and Province.

So, what would I hope to do differently as I look ahead to the next five years?

I would want to remind myself constantly that I am a disciple first and a Bishop second. This would mean grounding myself more and more in prayer and surrounding myself with people who could speak truth into my life.

I want to be a leader in the church that calls the church back to its foundational truths and doctrines but always looks for new ways to present that same truth. I would like to listen more and talk less.

But I would want to spend a greater proportion of time on those things that advance the mission of the church rather than those things that preserve and maintain the institution – both locally and nationally. Because this is my greatest desire and dream: that over the next years this Diocese makes the transition from maintenance to mission. This is nothing new and I feel almost guilty coming back to Synod this year and playing the same tape over again.

Mission, missional or mission-focused have become somewhat clichéd as western Christianity does its usual embrace of the latest fad in a 'straw-clutching' attempt to respond to consistent decline. And within this Province we have shown a remarkable inability to come to a common understanding of what 'mission' means. This was highlighted at last year's Common Life Missions Conference where those who focused on evangelism were, at best, ignored by those who came with a social agenda – and vice versa.

It seems that, within the church, we have vacillated between two philosophical extremes when it comes to our understanding and practice of mission. This tension is well summed up in a paper presented by Rene Padilla to the 2005 Lausanne conference

*'I believe that, with regard to the great tensions between the vertical interpretation of the gospel as essentially concerned with God's saving action in the life of individuals, and the horizontal interpretation of it as mainly concerned with human relationships in the world, we must get out of that rather primitive oscillating movement of going from one extreme to the other, which is not worthy of a movement which by its nature seeks to embrace the truth of the gospel in its fullness. A Christianity which has lost its vertical dimension has lost its salt and is not only insipid in itself, but useless for the world. But a Christianity which would use the vertical preoccupation as a means to escape from its responsibility for and in the common life of man is a denial of the incarnation, of God's love for the world manifested in Christ.'*

If we look at what lies on the agenda of this year's General Synod it appears that the church in Aotearoa / New Zealand sees mission as strengthening the institutional structures while changing the faith that's at the very heart of it in order to make it more sympathetic to the global culture with its values of tolerance, inclusion and personal freedom. Whereas the evangelical church in Aotearoa / New Zealand – in the outworking of its mission – holds the institutional forms and structures very lightly while preserving a strongly orthodox faith, which is the heart of its, rather more evangelistic, mission.

Unfortunately, the constant need to defend the Gospel in order to proclaim the Gospel has led to an undermining of our mission. We can become defensive and reactionary in our response to the wider church and to the liberalising agendas that are constantly arising rather than proactively describing such things as the joy that comes through our freedom in Christ, or the true beauty of holiness.

I am committed to being a voice for evangelical orthodoxy but I want to do it in a way that is creative and positive; in a manner that enhances our mission. So, two obvious questions flow out of this: what does it mean to be missional and what are the marks or the features of a mission focussed church? And probably, more specifically, what does it mean for us here in the Diocese of Nelson?

The first question can be answered quite briefly. 'Missional' is simply the adjective used to describe something that is characterised by its mission'.

Christopher Wright in his brilliant book 'The Mission of God' describes 'mission' as follows: *'our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation.'*

If I had to hazard a simple, personal definition it would be: *'to participate in the redemptive work of Jesus.'*

Following on from this then; what are the marks or the features of a mission-focused church?

**Firstly: A missional church is one that has Jesus at the centre.**

It will therefore be, I believe, a 'confessing' church: one that acknowledges that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Without going back over material that I shared in the synod sermon last evening, I want simply to acknowledge that the simple statement 'Jesus is Lord' was the earliest, simplest and shortest of all the Christian creeds and it has huge implications for both the Christian life and the Christian faith. To quote John Stott, *'(these words) express first a profound theological conviction about the historic Jesus and secondly a radical personal commitment to him in consequence.'*

But in the post-modern pluralism of today's western culture this creed is seen as an example of religious exclusivism and therefore a barrier to mission, and the scriptural 'metanarrative' that undergirds it as simply a 'multi-voiced tapestry that can be interpreted in a myriad of ways.'

In a sincere desire to be relevant to this culture many churches, and Dioceses, within the worldwide Anglican Communion have 'redefined' Jesus within a gospel of social activism. And we can see this reflected in some of the more controversial motions arising on the agenda paper for General Synod, but I'll come back to this in a few moments.

A confessing church on the other hand, does not need to 'morph' into the culture in order to speak into the culture. Jesus stepped so naturally and comfortably into a new culture when he engaged in the most intimate theological discussion with a Samaritan woman. And Paul embraced the culture when he met with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the Areopagus in Athens – but he used the culture to point them to Jesus.

Despite the values inherent in this new pluralistic age, the reality remains that within our communities we have never experienced such loneliness and alienation; increasing levels of violence are occurring within our homes and on our streets; children are abused physically and sexually; child poverty is now a reality; relationships are falling apart; communication has become impersonal. There is a mission field and we have a gospel – well, at least we do if we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord because only Jesus has the power to transform battered and broken communities. Jesus, and the people who have chosen to follow him.

The confessing church will have its greatest missional potential when it not only argues for the Lordship of Christ but also lives it.

I want to quote from a stunning book by Bishop Nazir-Ali – 'The Unique and Universal Christ' – subtitled 'Jesus in a Plural World.'

*'Alasdair MacIntyre (in his book 'a Study in Moral Theory') has drawn our attention to the importance of relating virtues to a moral and spiritual system. His thesis is that we live at a time when only discrete fragments of such a system survive and that*

*even this might be giving way to an all-enveloping darkness. His recipe is to advocate the emergence of distinct and distinctive moral and spiritual communities where the vision, the virtues and the values can be nurtured. This is how the Benedictines and other religious communities contributed to the survival of civilisation through the Dark Ages. If what he is saying is correct, then churches, particularly in the West, need to move from patterns of 'working with the grain', of being part of the social furniture, to being radically alternative communities where the leading evangelical metaphor is not 'salt' but 'light.' Rather than being dispersed in society and working invisibly within the existing social order, Christians have to model communities of vision that create character and produce values in ways that have integrity and wholeness.'*

A church that has redefined Jesus has also, of necessity, rejected any sense of scriptural authority or hermeneutical integrity because the scripture points to and proclaims Jesus as Lord. Therefore, when we come to General Synod we find ourselves at an impasse where one side looks to the scripture as a basis for its ethical and moral argument while the other looks to the culture and embraces a universalism that excludes the cross.

I don't propose to comment on the specific issues themselves – simply to ask that we continue to affirm the orthodox faith that has defined this Diocese and continue to confess Jesus Christ as our Lord.

### **Secondly: Missional Church as a feature of, or a plant out of, a strong local church.**

The desire to be missional does not come at the expense of a strong local church. In fact the very opposite is true; it grows out of, or is planted from, a strong and healthy home base. One excellent example that we became familiar with through the visit of Mike Pilavachi earlier this year, is 'Soul Survivor' in the UK. This incredibly influential youth movement grew out of a missional dream from the Anglican Church of St Andrew's in Chorleywood. This vibrant church had already birthed the New Wine movement and the 'Hensol retreats' for church leaders. The same is true of so many of the Fresh Expressions of Church that have sprung up throughout the UK. Most of them have their roots in a strong and vibrant local fellowship.

Two or three years ago I presented a strategic plan to Synod. In the preamble to this plan I suggested five key 'aims' that were formational in the growth and development of 'vibrant Christ-centred communities of faith'.

These were those 'aims':

- To glorify God through our worship that is both corporate and personal, culturally relevant and transcendent, self-denying and life-giving, yet always biblical.
- To preach and teach in such a way that lives are transformed and people are challenged and inspired in their commitment to discipleship.
- To build authentic community
- To be a missional church, reaching out beyond ourselves with acts of loving service and proclamation that radiate our commitment to Jesus.
- To be a church of grace that embraces and values people of all ages and circumstances in the redeeming love of Christ.

In the preparation leading up to this Synod I spent time reflecting on these aims. I am more convinced than ever that they are central to the development of what we have called 'vibrant' churches.

Over the past few weeks, I've taken time to support Hilary. And during this time I started jotting down some thoughts based on these five aims. These thoughts have grown into a small booklet which I have simply called 'Vibrant, Christ Centred, Communities of Faith.'

It is not a deep theological reflection on the nature and practice of the Church. Neither is it the definitive answer on all things pertaining to the Church.

It is exactly what the sub-title says, 'Reflections on the Church' based on my own experiences in parish ministry and on things I have observed as I've travelled throughout the Diocese.

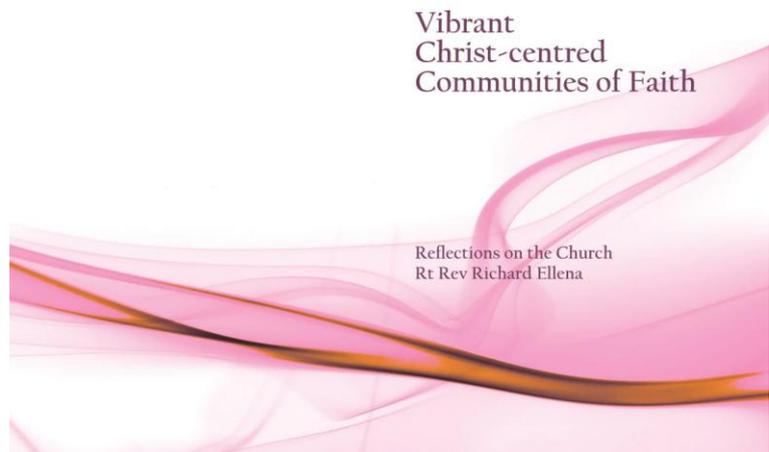
It is intended to be something of a discussion starter within our parishes. For example, people involved in the worship of the church might like to reflect on the first chapter; Vestry might like to consider the third chapter on community – or even the whole booklet.

To assist the discussion, there are a series of questions at the back of the booklet based on each chapter (as well as questions relating to the introduction).

As I have suggested, it is not 'rocket science' - it is simply a resource to stimulate discussion and planning within parishes that I want to encourage in order to build strong churches that are the seed-bed for mission.

There is however, one short section within the third chapter that I do want to refer to briefly and that is to do with three different 'types' of community within the Body of Christ. Within the Anglican Communion, whenever the term 'local church' is used, it does not refer to the parish but to the Diocese.

The Diocese is the central unit and the Bishop is the focus of unity of that Diocese. The parishes all exist to serve a common vision. This structure is embedded into the Canons of our Church. But some years ago this Diocese made a huge paradigm shift where the 'local church' would refer, not to the Diocese, but to each unique parish within the Diocese. And the Diocese would be the umbrella under – or within - which we maintain our common life. And so the local congregation becomes the focus of what we consider to be the Church. But this structure fails to recognise that there are three forms of community that are critical to the development of a strong and healthy Church.



The first (and the biggest) is the **‘Celebration.’** This is a large gathering – of 200 or more – that meets, primarily, as a source of inspiration.

The second is the **‘Congregation.’** This is the foundation of a community’s ‘fellowship.’ As I said a few moments ago – it is what we usually picture when we talk about ‘church.’

The third (and the smallest) is the **‘Cell.’** This is where relationships are formed and where discipleship happens.

I want to suggest that the ‘cell’ is the most important of the three and the most critical in the development of a vibrant church and is fundamental to the outworking of our vision and mission. The ‘celebration’ is where vision is empowered; the ‘congregation’ is where it is cast or communicated; but the ‘cell’ is where it is embodied.

The Anglican Church does ‘congregation’ well. But we hardly ever gather in ‘celebration’ and only pay lip service to the development of cell-life within our parishes. Little time or energy is given to the deliberate or strategic oversight of small groups or to the nurture of the leaders. And yet missional initiatives will almost always flow out of a committed cell.

I wish I had more time to tease this out because I think it is central to our vision. My own personal goal is to see how we, as a Diocese, might best encourage and inspire a renewed commitment to the life and growth of ‘cells’ within our Parishes. At the same time, to look at creative ways of facilitating the gathering of congregations together as ‘celebration.’

**Thirdly: A Missional Church will be both a witnessing church and a serving church.**

I don’t need to spend any time on this one because I alluded to it earlier when discussing mission. There has been an increasing polarisation between a more evangelistic approach to mission and that of social action. A ‘missional church’ will do both.

It will be a church of people who have the confidence and courage to share their own stories of God’s grace, simply and transparently – people who are ‘not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.’ But it will also be a church that responds to the needs of the community around them for no other reason than the fact that their hearts ache for the same things that makes God’s heart ache. To this extent a missional church is also a prophetic church. I am deeply grateful to our Anglican Care Charitable Trust and to Gerrie Mead for their continuing encouragement of our parish based social services.

**Final ‘bits and pieces’:**

**1. *Bishopdale Theological College***

I am thrilled at the continued development of Bishopdale Theological College under the leadership of Andrew Burgess. Together with Sue Patterson and Graham O’Brien and the many other part-time lecturers and staff, this College is carving a niche within the Church of the Province. We have more students enrolled (either full or part-time) than St John’s College in Auckland – at a budget that is a tenth of that of St John’s.

However this budget is an annual challenge and has only been achieved through a generous annual grant that has come from some friends of Bishopdale in the UK. That grant has now ceased. It is up to us as a Diocese to understand and to own this vision – both for the future of the Diocese and for the future of the evangelical voice in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia.

## 2. *Youth and Young Adults*

I am also excited by two new developments that have begun and are being planned within the church's ministry to youth and young adults. While one initiative is in its infancy the other is only on the drawing boards. I look forward to Luke Shaw's presentation to next year's Synod when we can see the flowering of this vision.

## 3. *Peer Support Groups*

I continue to be committed to the development of Peer Support Groups for all clergy. These are a requirement in some professions as a means of ensuring ongoing professional development and (as the name suggests) peer support.

I regret that the first attempt to establish them was done in rather an ad hoc fashion with little or no preparation and planning. I believe that they are essential to healthy ministry and it may be that we have to look at how our Regional Deaneries function in order to facilitate these small groups.

I hope to have a discussion paper out before the end of the year in order to keep this vision active.

Finally, my sincere thanks to every single member of the Diocese for your support and encouragement to both Hilary and me through this difficult period. Hilary has certainly felt enveloped by your prayer.

It has been a privilege to experience your love.

Which brings me to two other things that I'd want to do better during the next five years:

I want to say thank-you more.

And I want to go deeper in my relationship with God.

Richard Foster begins his book 'Celebration of Discipline' with these words:

*Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.'*

*I go through life as a transient on his way to eternity,  
made in the image of God  
but with that image debased,  
needing to be taught how to meditate,  
to worship,  
to think.*

*(Dr Donald Coggan – Archbishop of Canterbury)*

