**Presidential Address for June 2021 Diocesan Synod – Bishop Robert Innes**

It is my pleasure and privilege to be addressing you at this online, relatively short but also relatively intensive, diocesan synod.

Looking back, I can only say that we have come through an almost impossibly difficult year. Church is about communities animated by the Holy Spirit gathered in worship. It is about the sharing of bread and wine, praising the Lord in songs and hymns, gatherings to share the special times of family and community life. And so much of that necessary physicality of that has been taken from us. The masks we have to wear symbolise all too well the separation from each other that we’ve experienced.

At the outset, some of us perhaps denied the reality of this pandemic. It would soon be over. Others of us, perhaps mistakenly put our hopes in promises of a quick release that were periodically offered to us by our politicians and popular press. The reality is that we have simply had to endure.

There has been huge suffering. I feel very much for young people whose education has been disrupted and whose normal social interaction arrested. Businesses particularly in the travel, hospitality and entertainment sectors have been damaged. Of course many people have been ill with Covid, and some are suffering the chronic impacts of long covid. Many of us have lost loved ones and not been able to attend the funerals. There are particular impacts for those many of us in this diocese who live outside our home countries, separated from our families for a long period of time. Travel bans and quarantine restrictions don’t just constrain the ability to have a foreign holiday, they stop people seeing their children or grandchildren or attending a family wedding. There is a widespread psychological cost in terms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress which will become more evident as the strictly physical impact of Covid is brought under control. All of this has taken its toll on us as individuals, as chaplaincies and as a diocese.

And yet, by the grace of God we have survived and we go on walking together in faith. What have we learnt from this traumatic experience? It is surely important that we take time to reflect on that - to discern how it has affected us, what we did that worked, anything that was less successful, and what we take with us as we begin to recover. This seems such an important question that we are going to take some of our precious time in break out groups a little later to reflect on it and hopefully to learn.

From my perspective as bishop, I look back with extraordinary gratitude and thanksgiving. I have witnessed remarkable endurance, resilience and indeed success. Our clergy and lay leaders rapidly adapted to worship conducted on Zoom, Facebook live and Youtube. Communities worked hard to stay in touch with those who are particularly vulnerable. Social mission such as feeding projects for migrants and refugees continued in the most challenging of circumstances.

I reflect that our diocese is fundamentally about people, and we have some really excellent people! I pay tribute to our exceptional clergy, our dedicated lay officers, and our highly skilled central administrative staff. Thank you for all that you have done over this most difficult year.

If there has been one particular development over the year that is making a difference, it is the realisation of our ambition to appoint a team of freestanding stipended archdeacons. As bishops, David and I see what a difference this makes to our own ministry and to the wellbeing of all our chaplaincies. Sam Van Leer, the half time archdeacon of NW Europe, completes the team and is licensed to his role on Saturday.

I continue to be deeply impressed by the quality of our safeguarding team, delivering a professional safeguarding service across a continent and beyond.

At the same time, with the arrival of Jamie Ellis as a part-time content writer, and Amber Jackson as part-time digital comms officer, we can now for the first time talk about a professional communications team, albeit at just 1.6 full-time equivalent staff. And during Covid times, the importance of communications, particularly digital communications, has been abundantly evident.

Despite Covid, there have been a number of significant initiatives running over this last year. As a Synod we committed ourselves to the Covenant for the Wellbeing of the Clergy. In this context, we have been increasingly concerned about the existence and incidence of our clergy being bullied. The senior staff have set up a Working Group to look into this under the chairmanship of Bruce Bryant-Scott, the chaplain of Crete. I attended the first meeting, and I have to say that I found the testimony shared about bullying deeply moving and disturbing. It is evident that as well as developing the best possible policies, there are serious cultural issues about how we treat one another that have to be addressed.

We continue to move ahead with the national church living in Love and Faith programme, and I am grateful to Canon Jack McDonald for his advocacy for that important piece of work. Our Ministry Team has been working with record numbers of ordination candidates and just last Friday William Gulliford organised a valedictory service to commission seven candidates for their work in English dioceses. Each of them spoke in very warm terms about the care they had received from this Diocese and from William in particular. Clare Amos continues her work on Lay Discipleship. The Swiss Archdeaconry have been considering ‘Everyday Faith’ or ‘Setting God’s People Free’, and several Swiss chaplaincies have devised imaginative ways to help lay people integrate Sunday worship with life on Monday to Saturday. A team led by Clare Amos is engaged in the production of a lay ministry education course, and a really very helpful and significant booklet on how to be a churchwarden in the Diocese in Europe is almost ready for distribution.

John Newsome retired from his work as Advisor in Spirituality, and I am delighted to announce the appointment of The Revd. Ray Andrews, from Costa Blanca, as the new Diocesan Advisor in Spirituality. Ray has a wide brief for looking after the growing network of spiritual directors and encouraging retreats and quiet days and promoting everything connected with spiritual growth and development. Ray is doing this on an honorary basis. If your chaplaincy or archdeaconry would benefit from his advice, please do be in touch with him.

I want to highlight work with children and young people, because I feel particularly distressed by the impact that Covid has had on their young lives. Richard Bromley is now stepping back from our Youth Network - and thank you Richard for all that you have done to encourage young people in our diocese! Iaian Bendrey is now co-ordinating the network, with Sam Van Leer as the senior staff member responsible. I want to give a special mention to the work of Celia Patterson who is a godly play practitioner and an exemplary trainer. Work with children and young people will be one of the major emphases in the national church’s 10 year strategy. Thank you to all those in our chaplaincies who work with our children and for those who have managed to keep some kind of children’s work going during these difficult times.

There are two particular initiatives which are intrinsic to our own diocesan strategy as well as being important to the national church, and these are racial justice and the environment. I’m going to invite Leslie Nathaniel and then Andrew Caspari (on behalf of David Waller) to speak to us briefly about them.

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We are very aware of the impact of Covid-19. But in my view a longer term and ultimately more serious issue for our Diocese is the impact of Brexit. The effects of Brexit are at the moment disguised by Covid. But we are starting to see them more clearly. I’m going to mention three.

* Lay People who might have lived part of the year in the UK and part of the year in Southern Europe, those we call swallows, are finding that more difficult. Continuous residency is limited to 90 days for non-EU citizens. This will have an impact on our chaplaincies.
* Locum ministry is tricky. Locums are not full-time employees, neither are they strictly tourists. Are they volunteers? How do they fit in to the new visa and immigration regimes? how can we confidently deploy locums without risk of immigration issues?
* Full-time clergy are facing significant hurdles in deployment in so far as getting work permits and visas are concerned. In some countries like Switzerland, you now have to have a significant amount of French or German **before** you take up your post. An Interim Chaplain for Monaco has taken 5 months to get a visa.

Of course, the same is true in reverse for clergy from our sister churches who want to work in the UK. I recently received a letter from the German EKD seeking help because the Home Office is imposing a level B2 English language requirement before German pastors can work in Britain. I would be interested to know how many British MPs have B2 level in any foreign language, indeed, how many of them know what it is! Brexit, I’m afraid is biting, and we will have to reckon with its implications into the future.

To conclude. This is the last Synod of the triennium. For those who are not standing again, or those who stand but don’t get elected, thank you for your synodical fellowship over these past few years. A synod is literally a walking together, and we have walked together in faith through good times and through very difficult times. As we look to electing a new synod – this year using scanned email documents as well as regular post - I want to say as Synod President that we do very much encourage diversity of all kinds in the synod. I hope in particular that our diocesan synod will be increasingly representative of a diversity of races and a diversity of ages. Wouldn’t it be great to have one or two people under 30 on our synod! Please do bear this in mind in encouraging people to stand for election.

I will now hand back to the chair of our session, David Coulston. Which just gives me opportunity to say an especial thank you to David and his clergy co-chair Tuomas who have between them acted as vice-presidents of the synod. It has been a genuine pleasure for me to work with David and Tuomas over this past three years, and before that too. They have made a real impact on the life of our diocese, particularly through their work on clergy wellbeing, user guides and the clergy covenant. Thank you David and Tuomas for your appropriately challenging friendship and support in the leading roles that you have had over these years.