



Rt Revd Anne Dyer
Bishop of the United Diocese
of Aberdeen and Orkney
Scottish Episcopal Church

Bishop's Charge to Synod
Saturday 2 March 2019

Serving the Kingdom of God: connecting to our communities

Introduction

I address you today at the end of one year serving as your bishop. This has for me been a wonderful, exciting, and very encouraging year. I have met so many people, and seen so much, that has caused me to return again and again to God with thanksgiving. In city, shire, and the islands God is clearly at work, with signs of restoration and reconciliation everywhere.

Through this year I have been taking time to visit as many churches and places as possible, to meet with people inside and outside the churches, to get to know this diocese and its varying contexts, and to make sense of where we are spiritually. Through all the busyness of this year I have been praying, and asking God: 'What is that you want of us?' How can we serve you? What is next for us?'

Reflecting on the past year

As I have wondered about these questions a number of things have been striking.

The first is concerned with faithfulness. In most Charges in this diocese Episcopalians are of a good age. Energies have diminished, but the diligence in prayer remains. Again and again I have seen devout people holding faithfully to the practices of word and sacrament that have sustained them through their lives. Often this is accompanied by a care for the frailest members of congregations that is moving to behold.

The second thing that is striking is the diversity of the diocese – diversity seen in physical locations, local and community challenges, and in the churches. In some places congregations are growing. Growth is seen in numbers, in diversity of those present for worship, and in depth of engagement with God. In some places new things are clearly emerging, although right now it is not always clear what will follow. Nevertheless, in these places there is hope and excitement. We have been particularly blessed by those of you who have heard the call of God to come and join us; ordained ministers who have come to take responsibility for a Charge, and those of you who in retirement have moved to the Shire or Islands where your mature Christian gifts are very welcome indeed.

Almost without exception our churches are well cared for. Considerable time and diligence is given to maintaining lovely, very often small, buildings so that they are fit for worship. There is much to note here: so much time and care, not just for the congregation that gathers week by week, but also for the building in the hope that there might be a visitor, someone who might come to worship and decide to stay. Sadly however, we need to understand that this rarely happens these days. For most people there is barely a thought about church, and we are not on many people's list of options for a Sunday morning. We know that times have changed, and we need to face the fact that we live in new times, ones where we have to engage in mission differently.

Throughout the diocese there is a sense that this is a key time for us. This next chapter of our common life, the next few years, will be crucial. Our resources of all kinds are limited (time, people, finance), and we cannot maintain all that we are doing. In some places the challenge is more pressing. If something does not change now, then the period of possible change will be gone. There is a tipping point for a small and elderly flock, after which death of the congregation, and closure of the church, are inevitable. In a number of places the churches are very close to this point.

We could ignore the signs and decide to carry on as we are. If we do this in the next five to ten years a few churches will close, although most will struggle on. Many churches can continue, but in some places the quality of worship is diminishing because of lack of priests and lay-readers. Locally it is becoming increasingly difficult to find folk to fill rotas, and pastoral care out with Sunday is a great challenge.

Our focus in many places has been on keeping churches open and sustaining dwindling congregations, an increasingly difficult task for us, while at the same time very few folk are added to our number (there are few conversions and baptisms).

We live with the possibility that we might spend so much time and energy caring for our churches, that we miss the bigger picture, might miss our call to serve the Kingdom of God.

The challenge for us is to find a way of being the Body of Christ in the world that is more suitable for the times in which we live, these times where people know nothing much about God or church, not much about the story of Jesus, and show very little inclination to worship.

For this reason we must remind ourselves of some of the things we know and believe about God, as we look for new priorities for this next chapter of our life as individual Charges and congregations, and as a Diocese.

God and the Kingdom

First of all, let us remember that God is able to do all that God wants to do in any time and in any place. God does not need us. We are not essential to the mission of God in the world. God works without us, beyond us, and often in spite of us. God is 'above all, and through all and in all' (Ephesians 4:6). Understanding this can be freeing for us, we do not

have to do everything, nor do the things that we used to do. We do only the things that God calls us to be a part of. It is God's choice to invite us to participate in the mission of God in the world.

Wherever we are located God will be doing so much more than we can ask or think or imagine. What God is doing is not limited to what we see in church, or in the aggregation of all the activities of all the churches of all the denominations. In these times, when the Church in the north east of Scotland is small, this is good news. We might be small and limited, but God is not!

A key question to pay attention to is this: what is God doing where you are? This might be a difficult question, and lead to others. How do we find out what God is doing? Where do we begin to look?

As followers of Jesus Christ we hear his words to his disciples: 'Seek first the Kingdom of God'. Where the Kingdom is coming, there God is. As followers of Jesus we are reminded that it was our Lord who taught us to pray 'Thy Kingdom Come'. As we gather as the Body of Christ around his table, we say together in our Eucharistic prayer that 'we look for the coming of his Kingdom'.

What do we think this means? What do we think this looks like? How do we recognise the Kingdom when we see it?

Jesus had a great deal to say about the Kingdom. From his teaching we know that the signs that the Kingdom is present include peace, love, justice, care (of people and creation), restoration and reconciliation. Where good things are happening, there the Kingdom is appearing. We also know from his teaching that the Kingdom begins small: he spoke of seeds, and yeast, and small lights. And sometimes we have to search to find the Kingdom, but when we do it is like a treasure in a field or a pearl of great price, absolutely worth giving everything for. This brings us a challenge – how much are we prepared to give up or change for the sake of the Kingdom?

The Church and the Kingdom

We will need to remind ourselves of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God. In the congregations in our Charges we are fed by word and sacrament. There we connect our stories with God's story through the reading of scripture together. This is where we are formed as 'disciples', that is followers of Jesus, and as 'apostles', those sent out into the world to be part of God's work of restoration and reconciliation. The Church is not the Kingdom, but a servant of it. The Church is the Body of Christ in the world, sent by God in the power of the Holy Spirit to serve the Kingdom.

Serving the Kingdom does not mean neglecting church, but rather our experience of church, including worship and fellowship, enables us to connect with God in our neighbourhood. We meet the same God in both places – in worship and in the neighbourhood.

This change of priorities, seeking the Kingdom first, will not be possible in every place. Some congregations are now so small and elderly that any change of activity is just not possible. I don't want these congregations to feel in any way second class. We will care for them as best we can, through what is very likely the last chapter of a congregation's life. We will have to recognise that in spiritual terms this is palliative care,

Connecting to our communities

As God is at work where we are, where we live and worship, then this is where the mission of God (missio Dei) is taking place. Our challenge is to find where God is at work and join in. As we do this we will find ourselves along side those who share some of the same values as ourselves. They might share their motivations with us, and we, of course, will share ours with them. We might speak about the love of God in Jesus that has changed our lives. Or we might not say anything, but just get on with serving alongside others, seeing God's love and goodness revealed in a transformed situation.

What might this look like? Well let's take becoming 'dementia friendly' as an example.

You might decide that in gathering your Lent offering together, you should give it to a local charity. In doing this you can find out what is happening in your context or neighbourhood. You might decide to connect with some of those working in dementia support your area. Given that dementia is affecting so many families, including our own, you might be able to see what is supportive and caring, what brings life and joy in difficult situations. You might find yourselves drawn in to what is already taking place, or maybe decide to offer something new using your time and buildings, for example through a 'tea and hymns' event, or a friendship café. Typical of the Kingdom, you might find that a small commitment brings a great blessing, seen in loving care and transformed lives.

I expect that serving the Kingdom will take many different forms across the diocese. I don't expect that we will be doing the same things, but what they will have in common is that new priorities will be connecting us with people beyond our worshipping communities.

In summary

What I will be doing through the coming period is encouraging us all to turn our focus from church to Jesus and the Kingdom of God. I will be encouraging you to identify things that God is doing outside (beyond) the church, and join in. Through service of the Kingdom of God I will be encouraging you to connect afresh with the communities in which you are set, and of which we are a part. This is going to be my priority when I am with you as congregations – to help you seek the Kingdom of God so that as faithful 'apostles' of Christ you might be renewed by the joy that comes from being part of God's mission in the world.

As followers of Jesus Christ we will be:

Serving the Kingdom of God: connecting to our communities