

*Bishop's Address*

*To the 109<sup>th</sup> Session of the Synod [Special] of*

*The Diocese of Rupert's Land*

*June 20, 2009.*

*St. Chad's Anglican Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada*

A little over seven months ago we gathered in a regular biennial session of Diocesan Synod. I delivered an Address in which I spoke about the whole of our lives being based on the conviction that God really is redeeming the world – not just at the end of time – but now! I asked the question: “Where in our life, right now, are we being challenged to act on the conviction that the Risen Christ is alive and active in our midst? Where are we being challenged to ground our life in a trust of God, a hope in God, and a love from God?” I stated that when we choose to act on a deep trust of God, a hope in God, and a love from God, the result bears fruit, shows itself, in everything we do – both in the Church and in our daily lives. This conviction shows itself:

- in trust – that God is faithful and that God is at work in others, and in myself, to accomplish God's will in us and in our Church;
- in hope – that even in the pain or disillusionment of the present time, ultimately God's good and loving purposes will prevail – even in ways we can't presently imagine, and
- in love – an overwhelming sense of being grasped by God's love, and of being empowered to offer a love to others that will overcome all obstacles.

These fundamentals that depict who is the true source of our life; who has the ultimate power and potential in our existence; and who, in fact, has the greatest vested interest in our wholeness and well-being, represent the truth of God in Christ upon which we must all build our individual and collective lives. They serve for us as a set of attitudinal principles – a way to measure the faithfulness of our words and actions. However, they do not represent a vision of the Church we need to become, or of where we need to go. They are a necessary piece of the foundation we need.

Three years ago we formally adopted The Way Forward – Directions and Action Plans for the Diocese of Rupert's Land for the next three to five years. The plan is anchored in five directions:

- *Support and challenge parishes and groups of parishes to be active and energized mission centres in their local communities and beyond.*
- *Model and seek better ways of building an interdependent diocesan Christian community in today's world.*

- *Equip and empower lay and clergy leaders to lead us faithfully and creatively in an ever-changing environment.*
- *Nurture and support individuals, families, and parishes with opportunities for learning & living the Gospel.*
- *Examine and reallocate resources to where Christ's mission calls us.*

When we make the effort to bring the many initiatives that are happening in parishes and across the diocese, and place them alongside these five Directions, it is clear that significant engagement and progress is happening in many of these areas. Every month the Diocesan Council or Executive Committee receives updates from about a dozen “champions” who have been charged with tracking and encouraging the work in each of these Directions. It is quite impressive – things are happening in many places in our diocese.

These five Directions have given, and will continue to provide, a framework upon which to build necessary ministries and programs to create a Church based on values and characteristics that we have discerned together as critical to who we are and who God is calling us to become. The Directions represent strategic actions that we have identified as necessary to our future. However, they have been discerned largely by reflecting carefully and deeply on the areas of our life and ministry that are lacking effectiveness. The Directions are, in many ways, our response to the fact that both our world and the Church have changed – that our operating mode cannot be “business as usual” – “just keep doing what we’ve always done, only better.” They are, in a sense, a response to “what is not working.” Their strength lies in the fact that they represent a Church that is coming to terms with the context in which we find ourselves – that we are not burying our heads in the sand and pretending that all is well. However, they do not represent a vision of the Church we need to become, or of where we need to go. I think they can be compared to a kind of training program – perhaps like a set of exercise routines that one adopts when one realizes that one’s physical and mental condition is not what it needs to be, or could be, to live life fully and effectively. Regardless of what the specific activities of our lives might be, building a more robust level of physical and mental conditioning will serve us well.

What is missing, however, even when we face squarely the structures, programs and policies – “the way we do business” – is a vision of who and what we are discerning God is calling us to become! It is one thing to engage in an honest self-critique; to become serious about the changing demographics in our churches and communities; to learn about how effective communication and engagement takes place with people living in a post-modern age; and to examine, critically, how we need to change the way we present ourselves to the world, and how we estimate, realistically, our resources for this work. Coming to grips with this dose of reality is absolutely essential, or we will hopelessly repeat what is becoming increasingly ineffective. However, it is still based on “what we know doesn’t work anymore.” It is still a

*reaction* to what has been. It is still “looking back” – it is an honest and necessary reflection on what “was”, but it does not represent a vision for the future.

I don't know about you, but when I have carried out this serious critique; when I have honestly faced all of what has changed and is changing; when I have admitted the areas in which we are failing, when I have come to terms with what I need to let go of – I want to seek God's grace to answer the question: “So then, in light of all of this reality about how we need to change, **WHAT KIND OF CHURCH DOES GOD WANT TO BUILD TO BE AN EFFECTIVE WITNESS TO GOD AND GOD'S MISSION IN THE WORLD?**” I want to be part of a Spirit-filled *response* to this present day situation that God has placed us in and called us to be witnesses to God's redeeming work. Or to pick up on a modern-day cliché (you can choose to be part of the problem or part of the solution), “You've convinced me about all of the ways in which I need to stop being part of the problem. Now start inviting me to be part of the solution! What does it need to look like?”

We need to discern God's vision for God's Church in the present and future reality. We need to look *forward!* And I want to begin that today, and to invite all of us present to take a few steps in that direction together.

For those who like to hear the “bottom line” first – here it is. ***We need to be a Church of vital, local ministries to participate in and witness to God's mission in the world.*** Let me say it again: we need to be a Church of vital, local ministries to participate in and witness to God's mission in the world.

Now let me define and explain what I mean. What is a “local ministry?” A local ministry is *a community of Christian disciples bound to one another in a common identity and commitment.* A congregation or mission in a neighbourhood could be a local ministry if its members are interdependently bound to one another - identify a sense of belonging to one another - which they realize through a common identity and a shared commitment to life and work in their context. This representation is fairly self-evident. A community ministry fits this description too if its members “belong to one another” and share a commitment, individually and collectively, to certain pieces of work. A diocese can be a local ministry as well. Again, this would be the case where its members are interdependently bound to one another, identify a sense of belonging to one another, which is realized through a common identity and a shared commitment to life and work in its context. These are all local ministries – it is simply the description of their self-identity and the work to which they are committed that is distinct. This is not limited to Church structures. A family is probably the most basic and fundamental “local ministry” we can be part of – members interdependently bound to one another with a sense of belonging, and a shared commitment to supporting one another's life and work.

What will be necessary for our local ministries to be “vital” (meaning life-giving) in our day and age? I want to suggest five things on which we need to focus our attention on, and to which we need to commit our resources of people, time and money. Our local ministries need to:

1. Engage in faithful, transformative worship that opens us to the fullness of God and addresses both the opportunities and challenges we experience in our daily lives.
2. Engage in the intentional proclamation, contextualization and integration into daily life, for all ages, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
3. Engage in appropriate, mutually-supportive, nurture and pastoral care as an experience of God's love for us in Christ.
4. Engage in conscientious discernment, development and support of all persons' God-given gifts.
5. Engage in the practice of responsible, or just, stewardship of our God-given resources, as expressed in people, systems and the whole created order.

Naturally, this represents merely the skeleton of a vision – and it needs to be tested, refined, developed, and then “enfleshed” by all of us. It can be a beginning that is based, not on what we should no longer be or do, but, on what I believe God wants and is gracing us to become – *vital local ministries to participate in and witness to God's mission in the world.*

The first step of embracing any vision is the realization of “being together” in that vision – of being a *local ministry* – members bound to one another in a common identity and a shared commitment to life and work in their local context. It is against the backdrop of these statements about a vision for vital local ministries that we begin this afternoon's work. We are exploring our sense of being a local ministry with the questions, “Why do we need one another?” and “What must we do to better support one another in ministry and in God's mission?”

So, I believe God is calling us to form, or to re-form as the case maybe, into vital local ministries that participate in and witness to God's mission in the world, through:

- Faithful, transformative worship
- Intentional Gospel proclamation
- Mutual nurture and pastoral care
- Development of the God-given gifts of all
- Responsible stewardship of resources.

None of this is possible without authentic, covenanted relationship. I'm inviting all of us into that mutual relationship today. May each one of us, by God's grace, respond to that call.

Amen.