

SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND



The 183rd Synod of the Diocese of Huron
MAY 28-29, 2023

“SINGING THE LORD’S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND”

BISHOP’S CHARGE TO SYNOD

The Right Rev'd Todd Townshend

Centuries before Jesus’ time, perhaps the most devastating experience for God's people Israel was “The Exile”.

It was the time when they were displaced from their home in Jerusalem and either destroyed or exiled to Babylon—a “strange” land. Rather than devastating them completely, this experience resulted, eventually, in a fresh understanding of God and they committed to new ways of relating to God. They learned to “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land”.

The earliest Christians, starting in the days after the resurrection of Jesus, were stepping foot into a strange new land—the world of Resurrection Life. Things were not the same after the resurrection of Jesus. Whole new worlds had been created and now, especially with the sending of God’s Holy Spirit, whole new worlds were possible, indeed promised, for them!

We cannot underestimate the significance of the change that we are undergoing in our own time. It is not quite the same as exile. It is more like the experience of the first

Christians. It is the same resurrection life we live. It's just that twenty centuries have passed and resurrection life takes on new forms now. Resurrection life is always found in a "strange, new" land.

We can embrace this.

In the Resurrection, along with the Creation and the Promise, we find our mandate. The alpha (creation) and omega (reconciliation), and the key to understanding and living it all, the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Therefore, when we do the work of strategic planning over the next year, when we speak of "Strategic Directions" for the church, or a "Strategic Plan" for the Diocese of Huron, we can never forget that it is not our direction, it is not our plan. It is God's plan. It is God's mission, and we are trying to be led by it so that we can participate in it.

When Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, the end for those who are "in him" through baptism, the outcome, is assured. It will be good. It will be glorious. Every tear will be wiped away, It will be – it already is – the reconciliation of all things into the heart of the Creator, the Almighty, the Holy One.

With this news ringing in our ears, we are going to spend the next nine months describing and giving focus to our doing. Appropriately, these nine months will be a gestation period. Jesus came as a child, and he became a way for us. May this plan be all about him and his way.

We will, together, create a strategic direction, a plan, for the three or four years to come. The largest decisions, especially the ones that cost money and change lives, will come back to this body (Synod) for ratification.

Much of what will appear in this formal plan has already begun. You see two key elements of it in this year's meeting of Synod—the desire to become a more diverse church, and the desire to become a more safe—a more healthy—church.

I thank Bishop Lusa and Marion Little for joining with to give this leadership.

So, if there is a "Charge" this year, it is this: Say "yes" to Jesus (thank you Scott Trinder!) and let's make a hopeful, powerful, real plan. And, in doing that, let's pray that God will reshape our imaginations and our desires.

Here is one way to think about the reshaping of our imagination and desire.

In some places, our collective imagination is stubbornly clinging to a kind of Anglican church that existed in the 1950's. Not just the 1950's, but you know what I mean. I try not to say "we must" very often. But we must, must, pray that God will shift our imagination from the 1950's to the 2050's. Can we turn our gaze to the future? It's not that far away. 1950 was 73 years ago. 2050 is 27 years from now. Let's anchor our vision in the 2050's and commit to putting building blocks in place that will serve the Anglican church in 2050, here in Huron.

You will notice that I think the statistical predictions that the Anglican church will be gone in 2040 is unhelpful. It's logical, based on the current facts, no question. I think it is intended to "wake us up" to the facts. But all you need to do is to look around you and you

will see the reality of some of those statistics. We've been living this reality for a long time. We are aware of the frightening facts.

But think about this. On the morning of Jesus' resurrection, what facts did the followers of Jesus know? They knew that he was dead. "We saw it. We have evidence. He's in a tomb, dead and done. It was all for nothing", they said.

Those were "the facts".

Then, as they were heading home, as they were returning to their former lives, as they were picking up their nets, he came alongside. Alive. We don't know everything there is to know about the risen Jesus.

The current facts about the church should scare us to death. We are in trouble. They should scare us to death. Right to the death of Jesus. Scared right into his arms in the garden of discovery. The garden of his new life. And, like Mary, we say, "Jesus!?! is that you?" Is that you there? Yes, it is. Right in this room, right now. Yes, it is.

Go! he says. Go and I will meet you there. Where? You will see.

It is a strange new world. Or maybe we're stuck in a strange fake world and he is propelling us into the reality of his garden of new life. He is also out there, ahead of us. And we go, to tend and to till, to plunge ourselves into resurrection life, and to lean into God's promises, especially the ones focused on reconciliation. What does this mean, (better) what does it look like? That is our work.

The story of Creation's first garden as told in Genesis, the first book of our Bible. God planted a garden and into this garden God placed the human creatures. What a gift. And the human's first task was to simply receive the gift. To simply receive it – as a gift. With no strings attached. Eat freely! Drink freely! Let us enjoy this garden together, says the LORD. So, they did.

And, as everyone who lives in a garden knows, the gift keeps growing. So, you've got to participate in that garden. You become part of its life. You become a fellow gardener. And the continuing reception of the gift draws you into its life. You see that you have a crucial role; to guard and to cultivate, to tend and to till, to treasure and to love, to care for the garden, and to call it home.

To tend and to till. Let that be our shorthand for our strategy for a while. Our mission. To tend: to care for or look after; give one's attention to as an attendant or servant, or steward. To till: to prepare or to cultivate, to strive for by effort towards a particular aim. We are to receive, and then to tend and to till the gift we have been given.

Here is a list of just some of the area of work, currently underway, that will require our tending and tilling. These and other things will become element of the plan.

Learning Church

Becoming a more learning church isn't just about gaining more knowledge. It is about committing to a continuing conversion to the fullness of the Gospel. Catechumenal faith formation, spiritual growth, in small groups, for everyone, can become the central, key dynamic in every parish. That's part of the plan.

Just Church

God's justice will be the only thing, in the end. Let us seek God's justice now. It begins at home. In our home places. Putting things right. For me, this is where our work towards justice begins. Then we have some standing to address the injustices of the world around us That is why the work of "Safe Church" belongs here. Safe Church, Healthy Church. As you will see, the work of creating health communities is central to almost everything else. Developing the green areas of the "Safe Church O Meter" is part of the plan.

Diverse Church

If you want to future-proof your church, make it intercultural, and intergenerational.

And where do we see "newness"?

Indigenous Ministry

There are wonderful, I pray healing, developments in creating a team of ministers in Huron Indigenous ministries for leadership. Together with LAIC, Bridge Builders, and praying for Sacred Circle and the holy possibilities developing there, very significant proposals will be considered to fund ministry leadership (people) with portion of our "land" resources. Making a decision about that will be part of the plan.

Huron Farmworkers Ministry

Incredible example of partnerships with Anglican leadership, the Rev. Enrique Martinez and all the many people who a jumping on board to be part of it.

Youth

We will continue to make developing ministry for and with children and youth a highest priority. The wellbeing of children has to be constantly before us. There is nothing more important. Not because children are the future of the church—no, they are the church now. It's because Jesus said let the little children come to me. He said, if you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, if you want to live in the reign of God, follow the children.

And so many other things will be addressed in the plan: strategic communication, leadership models, vocational development, and revitalizing lay ministry.

We will also have very specific guidance for parishes to make serious decisions about our physical and temporal resources.

"We do not have enough people for all of our locations". "We cannot offer full-service ministry with our current resources." This is a reality, but the "scarcity" focus undercuts our imagination.

We have thousands and thousands of committed disciples, well trained and learning leaders, physical assets worth over 200 million dollars. Across all the parishes of Huron, if you add it up, together we have almost 100 million in designated trust funds and a property portfolio valued at about 150 million. Just round numbers. How do we unlock this potential? How do we tend and till this abundance?

Finally, developing new resources for ministry will be hugely important for future ministry. Will need to boost this significantly so that all parishes can thrive without the constant anxiety of dwindling financial resources. That will be part of the plan.

There are so many things we are already doing that are so hopeful. They cannot all be named here.

Everything comes down to receiving the gift. The plan is to open our eyes, open our hearts, and stretch out our hands to accept the gifts of God, even if they seem strange and new. Then, we dive into the future with the Risen One, with the wind of the Spirit at our backs. We are disciples and stewards of the riches of Jesus Christ. We are the disciples and stewards of the riches of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

+ *Todd*