

Bishop's Charge to 66th Synod: Edmonton 2025
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Jane Alexander, Bishop of Edmonton
October 5, 2019

If we could look forward to two synods time, at the Diocese of Edmonton in 2025, what would we hope to see? I would like to see lively and engaged congregations in every parish, a church known for compassion, healing and inclusion; a new generation of young people growing up to know and love Jesus and a community of engaged disciples who are, quite literally, changing the world.

Our diocesan vision is to proclaim the Gospel, make disciples and further the Kingdom. For us to live fully into this mission there are some building blocks that need to be in place. In some places they need to be strengthened and in some to be re-embraced. In looking ahead there are conversations we need to have in every parish for our hopes for the future. In many ways they may be like the conversations we had in preparing our case statements for the REACH campaign; when we thought of the things that would help us in our mission and ministry.

For my part, when I look ahead to 2025 I am confident that God will lead us into a time when our parishes are indeed places that are integral to the local neighbourhood, incubators of faith, places of welcome and inclusion, places that respond to local concerns and needs. Safe places. Basically, places where people can see and feel the presence and love of Christ in action. Having experienced that love, I pray that people will be drawn ever closer to God and seek to become disciples.

In order for this to happen, I believe there are four areas we need to make priorities in our diocesan ministries of support, education and facilitation:

1. Growing Healthy Parishes
2. Committed Discipleship
3. A Rural Plan
4. Exemplary Stewardship of Our Resources.

Growing Healthy Parishes

We have talked about church growth before but, I think, a quick refresher is good: The factors associated with growth are worth mentioning. *From Anecdote to Evidence*, findings from the Church Growth Research Programme, 2011-2013, (Church of England), listed the following attributes of healthy parishes:

- Clear mission and purpose;
- Willing to self-reflect and learn continually;
- Willing to change and adapt (to experiment);
- Actively engaging children and teenagers (retreats, conferences, etc.);
- Actively engaging with those who might not go to church (those outside the existing community);
- Hospitality (good welcoming and follow up for visitors);

- Committed to nurturing new and existing members (evangelism, discipleship courses);
- Vision (a vision for growth – needs to be intentional).

Building on what we know, using the materials from the Church Growth Research Program, I.D., and the Holy Cow surveys we are then in a good space to plan for growth. We need to reach more of our existing communities but we also need the flexibility to reach into new developments: this is clearly seen in the greater Edmonton area, but also in a few rural communities, as well. It is unlikely that we can afford many new church buildings, so this hoped for flexibility means new partnerships – such as the one between Holy Trinity Riverbend, the Diocese and Right at Home Housing Society – and the formation of new worshipping communities in non-traditional venues. There is also scope for ecumenical partnerships, such as the Anglican Lutheran Church of Holy Trinity, in Edson, birthed from the churches of St. Catherine’s Anglican and Grace Lutheran.

There are places that could use extra support because of an economic downturn, places in need of a fresh start and sense of purpose in the local area. Through the REACH campaign extra levels of support have been offered through both the Rural Ministry Initiative and the Ministry Fund. We have learned many things about the need for sustained and supported ministry.

When we think of growth it is, of course, not just numbers in Sunday worship: it is spiritual formation and growth, personal and corporate and a host of other factors. However, I think, we sometimes assume that talking about numerical growth is bad or difficult. I am asking every parish to set a 10% growth target for Sunday attendance, ‘yes,’ but also in participation in Bible studies and prayer groups, in attendance at Messy Church, in Baptisms, in outreach. So, ‘yes,’ I am praying that for every **10** people who currently participate over the next 5 years another **1** person will be added to that number. To be honest I think God might tell me I am dreaming too small – and God is always right. But let’s pray for growth, work for growth, believe in growth. Let us exceed our target, take a risk: pick a larger target. The diocesan team of archdeacons, chaplains and specialists are at our disposal. We will call upon Michael Harvey to help us. He is excited to encourage us to “Go for growth.” If we want the Church to grow we need to give priority to making disciples which leads us to #2: Committed Discipleship.

2. Committed Disciples of Jesus with lay and ordained leaders across the widest possible age range

In 2016 the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC), issued a remarkable call to every Church and every Christian to return to a focus on being intentional in our discipleship. Jesus invited people to follow Him, and that call remains central to Christians today. Jesus invites people not just to join him, not just to worship Him, but to live and share a life shaped by Him and like His.

As we each respond, individually and collectively, we become part of a new movement of God worldwide. We become part of a learning community; apprentices formed by the Jesus whom we meet in scripture and who is active in our ordinary lives. All across the Anglican Communion people are re-discovering in provinces, dioceses and congregations how following Jesus shapes every part of their lives. In Cyprus and the Gulf they call this ‘Doing Good and Doing God’; in

the Church of England it is 'Set God's People Free'; in the US it is a call to 'The Way of Love' and, in Kenya, they speak of 'A Wholesome Ministry for a Wholesome Nation' (JSL materials).

Here in the Diocese of Edmonton a commitment to help people grow in their discipleship by living and sharing a 'Jesus Shaped Life' (JSL) is intricately linked to the work that is being done through our I.D. approach. Discipleship is lifelong formation and leads us to release the gifts within us in the service of Christ. For Christians, discipleship is a journey of learning and living the way of Jesus in community, for the sake of the world. We become more Christ-like and more dedicated to model Christ's transforming love, personally, communally and in our wider societies (JSL materials).

Discipleship is about the shape and purpose of our whole lives. Discipleship is, essentially, about a relationship – a relationship of grace (which means receiving life and blessing from God), loyalty and obedience. In short, 'Living a Jesus-shaped life.' To get started there are several questions we can ask ourselves, like:

- In which areas of my life do I live most like Jesus?
- In which areas of my life do I live most unlike Jesus?
- In which part of my life do I need to see most change if my discipleship is going to be 'whole-life'? (*JSL materials from Faith2Share*)

We know that the 5 Marks of Mission of the communion provide us with a roadmap for living out our discipleship at the personal and parish level. So, how might we link these with our dream of living a Jesus Shaped Life? What questions might we ask ourselves or challenges might we set? All of us will have different answers, but these are the questions we talk about most frequently in the JSL leadership group:



TELL: We proclaim the Good News. Could you share your own story of faith with your family, at work, in your community?

TEACH: We teach, baptise and nurture new believers. We cannot teach what we do not know. Could you commit to: Reading scripture daily; Praying daily; Gathering outside the Sunday service with others to pray, share and learn?

TEND: We respond to human need by loving service. How do you use your time and talents to serve others and protect the poor, marginalised and vulnerable?

TRANSFORM: We work to transform unjust structures of society, challenging violence of every kind and pursuing peace and reconciliation. How do you ask for and offer forgiveness? What might you do to pursue reconciliation of broken relationships in personal life, community and society, or advocate for justice and peace? What has a focus on reconciliation with our First Nations brothers and sisters meant in your community?

TREASURE: We strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and to sustain and renew the life of the earth. We are just finishing the season of creation which focuses our thoughts on what is going on in the natural world around us and the interactions between humanity and nature. Did

you find ways to live more responsibly and consume less and discover practical ways to demonstrate care for creation? Have you learned new things from the First Peoples of this land?

These are huge questions, but for us as followers of Jesus, following means being able to **witness** to people that the life of faith makes a **real** difference to **real** life issues. Speaking of real life issues leads us to #3: a Rural Plan.

Prayer for Living and Sharing Jesus-Shaped Life

Almighty God,
You have called us to live and share
Jesus-shaped life
in a Jesus-shaped church
for a Jesus-shaped world.
Empower us with your Holy Spirit
to live as disciples who make disciples
of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.
Amen.

3. A Rural Ministry Plan

Parishes across the diocese face different kinds of challenges in urban and rural settings. The difficulties we are experiencing in some communities are seen across Canada and across other parts of the Communion. Recent research has pointed to marks of a healthy church as we saw before, but there are also marks of fragile churches.

In many rural communities, congregations have already become quite small and are likely to be fragile. There are five marks of a fragile church: financial pressure and congregational anxiety about dwindling resources; actual or feared inability to replace church officers; lack of time and energy among clergy to start new things; a lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them; and single-figure congregations with an age profile of 75 and above (*S. Anne Lawson (2019) Research Report: The Marks of the Fragile Rural Church. Rural Theology, 17 (1), 51-57*).

We have started a task force to look at rural growth and revitalization. Over the next five years, we plan to hold mission workshops in every rural parish where we can explore the question of ‘what does growth look like here?’ I am aware of at least three communities experiencing unprecedented difficulties: high unemployment, rising crime and housing issues. We need to more fully explore how the church *stands in the gap* in these situations, and how we can ensure good sustainable ministry when the local parish is in financial difficulty. A distinctive plan for rural ministry will give voice to local concerns and help us build a healthy future. It is very difficult for parishes to plan for the future when the financial situation puts everyone into survival mode. This brings us to #4: Exemplary Stewardship of Resources.

4. Exemplary stewardship of our resources

Most of our parishes exist today because of the incredible generosity and sacrificial giving of generations past. When we look at the seemingly prohibitive costs of planning new builds, we

can forget that our forebears in the faith took enormous risks to raise funds just as large in their day. If we are serious about growth, then we need to be serious about stewardship and about setting priorities for future communities by investing wisely and spending on new ventures as required. At the diocesan level we are looking at how we best steward our financial resources. This year will see a revitalization of the diocesan stewardship committee and opportunities for education. We are also reviewing the diocesan apportionment policy, as it has been more than 10 years since our last review. Our stewardship also looks at how we care for and manage property in the diocese, and how we encourage parishes to *green* their buildings for both environmental and financial benefits.

We know that both the Rural Ministry Initiative and the Indigenous Ministry Initiative are making a huge difference to supporting and growing ministry in the diocese. The work of reconciliation goes on across communities both inside and outside the church. Our chaplains provide invaluable support in hospitals, educational institutions, recovery centres and long-term care facilities. I would hate to see of that work cut, but this ministry is rich in impact and poor in attracting funding. Therefore, a robust stewardship program and long-term financial plan will provide stability for these programs.

I hope that you share my vision and excitement for what God is doing here in the Diocese of Edmonton and, also, my belief that we are incredibly blessed by God and that it is God's dearest wish for God's church to grow and to thrive. Let us be courageous and outrageous in our hopes for the future.