



**Diocesan Synod  
Saturday May 23rd 2009  
Sermon by Bishop Michael Ingham**

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25: 37-40)

There was a report on the Internet this week from Scotland. Apparently, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland is facing a nation-wide shortage of ordained ministers. And so they are looking at creating “virtual ministers.” These are computer screens erected in churches around the country with a video image of someone in a central studio preaching and leading the service. Instead of a real minister you get a virtual minister.

We are a very long way indeed from this in the Diocese of New Westminster. One of our nicest problems is that we have a line-up of young, talented and very dedicated graduates who would like to serve as clergy in our churches. We also have a good many experienced priests from around the world who have come to work with us, and many others who would like to, because they think this Diocese is a good place to be. So far from facing a shortage of clergy, we have a shortage of places to put clergy. This is a sign of our vitality.

There are many other signs. In January this year we watched bombs falling on people in Gaza, and wondered what we could do. We prayed, of course, but then the Bishop of Jerusalem put out an appeal for help for the Anglican Hospital in Gaza that was overrun with casualties and faced a critical shortage of medical supplies. From a single letter read out in churches across this Diocese on one Sunday, Anglicans responded at probably the worst moment in the global economy. And today we have sent over \$76,000 to the Diocese of Jerusalem for the relief of patients in our Anglican Hospital there.

That’s not all. This year we are celebrating with other Canadian Anglicans the 50th anniversary of the Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund. In fifty years the Fund has received over \$8 million from people in this Diocese. We are among the strongest givers to this work of Christ in serving the poor and hungry throughout the world.

We are a generous people. Within the last five years, in response to the suffering of innocent children in the Indian Residential Schools across Canada, we contributed over a million dollars from this Diocese alone to help put right an historic wrong. And our national church, through the General Synod, has become a strong and powerful advocate of justice and reconciliation among indigenous peoples in this country, establishing recently a new National Indigenous Bishop to care for and give voice to the aspirations of first nations Anglicans in this church.

We continue to reach out in compassion to the least of God's children in response to this biblical commandment in Matthew 25. Every night across the Lower Mainland our parishes provide shelter for the homeless and food for the hungry. We feed 100,000 people a year in our churches, and I mean people who don't belong to our churches. We provide housing for hundreds of people every night. We have a magnificent summer camp that ensures a safe and happy environment for hundreds of young people and families, and offers satisfying volunteer work to dozens of young people.

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Our Diocese has responded thoughtfully and carefully to the inconvenient truths of climate change and environmental decay. A large number of parishes have undertaken energy audits and taken a serious look at their carbon footprint. We have begun to experiment with alternative energy sources like solar panels on church steeples and even wind turbines in some locations (though it turns out there is more sun than wind in this Diocese!) We are developing a new sense of the sacredness of God's creation by thinking of the earth theologically and not just economically.

Canada has an aging population with a low birth rate, and so not surprisingly we find that our congregations do too. We are challenged therefore to attract youth and young people, and although we have made some conscious efforts to do this, we have also suffered some unexpected financial setbacks. And we are facing profound shifts in immigration patterns, and ethnic diversity, and changing intellectual paradigms in our wider society that make it difficult for an old and traditional church like ours to adapt quickly and appropriately, without simply chasing the latest fashions or trends.

Douglas Todd, our local and very accomplished religion writer, has recently edited a perceptive book called “Cascadia” that describes the unique spiritual ecology of the West Coast of Canada and the Northwest United States. It turns out that we who live in this part of the world have never been very fond of organized religion. We think of ourselves as spiritual but not religious. We feel closer to God on a mountain trail or a forest glade than in a prayer meeting. The people with the highest level of religious commitment among us tend to be immigrants, but they too tend to fall away as the generations go by and the secular environment of British Columbia overtakes them.

Secularism is our greatest challenge: the assumption that you can have God without religious faith. And so too is the rapid speed of social change and population movement. We have church buildings in this Diocese that were surrounded by green fields only a generation ago, and have now been swallowed up by the city. We have churches that were built for large Sunday Schools

in neighbourhoods where young adults and families can now no longer afford to live. We have parishes that were located in Anglo Saxon suburbs for almost a century where now few English signs can be found in the community.

We are an old and venerable church that has been slow to respond to these massive changes in our environment. And not surprisingly a debate has arisen among us about the best way to do it, and there are strong and honest convictions on every side.

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We know how to grow churches. It is not a secret. We know that strong and growing churches require a number of particular ingredients.

First, there has to be a strong sense of mission. The mission of Christ is the reason for the church. A church that knows Christ and has faith in Christ has a clear sense of purpose. It has to do with some of the things Bishop David said to us last night - having a regular daily discipline of prayer; reading the Bible and discussing it together; praying for others and not just ourselves. Knowing Christ is a daily personal discipline. When parish churches have a number of such people, they are clear about their identity.

Mission is not about survival. Holding on to the familiar is not mission. And neither is mission the same thing as expanding budgets or filling pews. Mission, as we understand it in the Anglican Communion, has five marks:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Churches centred in mission are engaged in all or most of these efforts, and they teach and sustain their members in how to fulfill these goals in their daily life.

Second, there has to be strong, wise, and effective leadership. Leaders who know how to lead and serve other people find themselves in strong and growing churches, and this is true whatever the parish size. Small churches can be vital and sustainable with wise and effective leadership. And leadership has to be both lay and ordained. Clergy cannot do this alone. Nor can laity do this without clergy support. Strong leadership is both mutual and collaborative, and where it exists people will come to be nourished by it.

Third, growing churches have creative worship. Worship is the lifeblood of Anglicans. Where liturgy can capture the imagination of newcomers and also sustain the faith of spiritual veterans, you have a growing church. And the fact is, people are joining our church every week. We need to pay as much attention to those who are coming as to those who are going. Some are coming out of spiritual curiosity, with no particular knowledge of Christianity or the Anglican Way.

Others are coming from authoritarian or fundamentalist churches in search of the Anglican Big Tent, our capacity to accommodate diversity and deepen faith through liturgy and mystery. And yet others are coming because we are willing to change our style and even some of our beliefs. They sense a new openness in Anglican Christianity, despite all its tensions, that gives them a new and welcome sense of freedom.

Our worship needs to respond to the spiritual diversity of these fresh seekers of Christ. And some of this is quite difficult. It means asking ourselves deep questions about what is essential, and what can be changed. It means asking what sort of music and prayer is able to connect with people who may be spiritual but not religious. But living churches ask themselves these questions. They are not afraid of them. And in this very struggle there is an encounter with the Spirit of God, and from that meeting emerges a new future.

We know a lot about church growth. We know, for instance, that young people tend to like new buildings. They are less comfortable with stained glass and dark wood. They want child care, and user friendly liturgy, and good preaching and teaching that answers the questions they are asking, not the questions of their parents and grandparents. We know that clear signage is important, and parking spaces, and small groups that teach and welcome and miss people when they are absent.

It is not true that only conservative churches are growing. What is true is that confident churches are growing, and this has nothing to do with size. You can be small and confident (just look at the Bishop of Taiwan!) and you can be liberal, or catholic, or traditionalist, or emerging. Theology and ideology are less important than mission and leadership and worship and flexibility. We know how to grow churches.

And that is our challenge at this Synod. We find ourselves at a moment of real change. Not so much in our understanding of the Gospel, although that does slowly change over time, even as it also remains the same. But more in our willingness to take risks and adapt to this rapidly shifting social and secular world.

We are a wealthy church - rich in people, in talents, in faith, in land and buildings, in leadership and financial resources, and in compassion - even in these tough times. We are focused on God's love for all people, and have suffered a good deal of misunderstanding because of this. We are fulfilling the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25 in many ways. But we cannot be content with survival. And we cannot cling to the past. God is opening new fields of opportunity for our church, new occasions for growth and mission, and it is our task to respond.

This will be our work today at this Synod. Re-organization is never an end in itself. It is justified only by one purpose, and that is to serve the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to draw the world into his compassion.

I invite you now into the work of this Holy Synod, to seek God's direction for our Diocese in these changing times.