

**Presidential Address by the Rt Revd Dr Helen-Ann Hartley  
to the Newcastle Diocesan Synod at a meeting held on 15 July 2023  
at Dr Thomlinson Church of England Middle School, Rothbury.**

A couple of weekends ago, in the timely morning-sized gap in-between ordinations, I took part in the Great North 10k. Beginning and ending on Newcastle's Town Moor, and winding its way along the motorway, into the city centre, and back out again, there was a fantastic atmosphere as nearly 6000 souls of varying abilities committed to making their way round the route (the headwind during the final 3kms however was perhaps *less* fantastic). You don't just get up in the morning and decide to run 10k (well I wouldn't advise it), you need to do some training. In terms of my progress along the Great North 10k route, a man running with a wheelie bin strapped to his back had clearly trained hard because his pace was a lot faster than mine (he was going *wheely* fast [kudos to Simon Harper for that one; Simon btw was also doing the run along with his daughter Lucy]), but I *did* manage to catch up with the runner dressed as a caveman wielding a large club, and comfortably overtake him just as we crossed the Tyne Bridge. The caveman's actual name by the way was *Paul*: various trucks pumping out motivational music were cheerily shouting out his name as we made our way round the course.

Another Paul (the Apostle) in his letters to new Christian communities in the first century evoked sporting imagery to inspire and challenge some of his audiences, and as a tool to give voice to his own faith journey. Such imagery made good sense in contexts like the region around Corinth which hosted a major sporting event every two years: the Isthmian games. Taken as a whole, Paul's letters demonstrate how the Gospel was taught and held in ways that were very firmly in tune with, but not simply complacent to the context in which the first Christians lived. Doctrine was developed in the midst of challenge, change and reflection; understood and proclaimed in dynamic ways. Core truths about God, the world and us were rooted and held in a landscape of complexity and challenge. We know from Paul's letters that the communities and churches he founded experienced the full joys of the Gospel as well as many downs, through anxieties about finance, internal theological wrangles, and loss of confidence. In all of this, Paul was exercised about what it meant to be human in the now, and what it meant to be made in God's image. Paul, with deep personal conviction about the transforming power of what God had done in Jesus Christ desired for his communities to grow into this new life, and this involved releasing people for mission (translate that into today: it means deep imagination about what ministry can be, lay and ordained. This must be a fundamental driver for our life together in this new season. As we seek to grow younger and more diverse and grow new worshipping communities, who are the people we *don't* see currently?

In my first address to this Synod soon after my installation as your Bishop, I indicated a number of discerned points, some of which I will touch on again in this address. Since that address, and more recently, we have properly launched our outward facing values:

*seeking*  
*sharing*  
*sending*

I've been really encouraged at the people who have been in touch to tell me how you are taking part in or overhearing positive conversations about these words and are beginning to think what they might mean for your own and your community's engagement in God's mission. This is an invitation to stretch your imagination, and not be limited by present anxieties and long-held ways of being Church. Our values of seeking, sharing and sending are not millstones to weigh us down with attempts to shoe-horn strategy into them but are foundations to build on in this new season as we turn outwards in mission.

Our ordinations two weekends ago were and are a source of much rejoicing. The 3 new deacons and 7 priests beginning new seasons of ministry are signs of hope and beacons of light. Please pray for them particularly in these early weeks and months.

I am delighted that yesterday we announced our new Dean, the Rev'd Lee Batson who joins us this morning. Lee, may I say in the formal context of this Presidential address how *much* we rejoice with you that God has called you into this role, that we are *very* much looking forward to your arrival in the Autumn, and to developing the ministry and reach of the Cathedral in Newcastle city centre *and* across our whole diocese. And perhaps most importantly, please know that our prayers are with you and Stephanie as you prepare to join us in the North, and assurance that we will do all we can to ensure you are welcomed and attuned to the whys and wherefores of our region!

As we welcome, we also farewell. And today I would like to bid a formal farewell to two people who have made immeasurable contributions over many years to our life together. Firstly, to Phil Ambrose, who has worked in the financial department in Church House, and secondly, to our Diocesan Director of Education, Canon Paul Rickeard. To both Phil and Paul, we offer our profound thanks and assurance of our prayers for the new seasons in your life and work in teaching and in finance.

Filling the vacancy at the Cathedral hasn't been the only senior appointment process to navigate in recent months. We continue to search for a Director of Mission and Ministry. I am very pleased however, to be able to say that on Monday, we will be announcing our new Diocesan Director of Ordinands and Vocations; a new role that draws together *all* of our vocational work, lay and ordained. I am particularly excited by the opportunities this will present to us to grow a Church that is younger and more diverse. Note that younger isn't all about children and young people: it is younger than we are and that is relative to our context; and note that diversity is diversity in *all* its forms, again relative to our context. I am very grateful to colleagues in Church House who are working hard to keep the vocational wheels turning and look forward with them to new and refreshed leadership in this important area. This gives me an opportunity to say how hard staff in Church House work across our diocese to support our parishes and benefices. This is where the Share rubber hits the road, and I have seen with my own eyes how much our colleagues do on our behalf.

None of this of course would be possible without resources and means, and so our discussions about finance and the budget today are important. We cannot argue with reality. When Eddie Howe took up oversight of Newcastle United football club, he observed that the players were generally unfit, and there was a culture of 'we're going to lose'. Now please don't hear me saying that this applies like for like to us (I am *not* trying to get you all to download the 'couch

to 5k' app), *however* there are things we can do and should do to reduce silos and duplication and improve our spiritual and financial fitness (if you want to use that term) *and* there are things we can do to improve our confidence for mission. As with our vocations work, none of this will happen overnight; it will require challenge and change; it will demand steps are taken to balance our budget. There is work to be done across the piece to help us engage with God's mission in ways that will release energy for mission and not be weighed down by silos and negative attitudes. Balance all of that with the immense courage and creativity I have seen on an almost daily basis in our parishes, benefices, schools and chaplaincies. But unless we are all really committed to mission initiatives (and there are some excellent examples in our diocese) then there is a real risk that God's mission remains in the 'too hard' basket, or for someone else to do, and the result is inertia and resignation to decline. Part of the joy and headache of episcopal ministry is that I get to see and hear about so much across the landscapes of our diocese, but as the anthropologist and financial times journalist Gillian Tett says, we need a worm's eye view as much as a bird's eye view: the detail from the ground-up matters, and even more so in a diocese with contexts as diverse as ours. It also means that attention to detail matters, and scrutiny and accountability are important in assessing how we can continue to engage in God's mission.

I have asked Bishop Mark to convene a small strategy working group to help bring together the next phase of the Deanery Development work, driven by our outward facing 'seeking, sharing, sending' values, along with the governance review work currently happening. It seems timely to get this piece of strategic work going soon, so that we can start to draw strands together and focus our resources. Alongside all of that, in my office we (in collaboration with Ce Pacitti) are in the process of overhauling the Ministry Development Review process, which I see as part of my responsibility and priority as your bishop to attend to clergy wellbeing, development, and accountability. We are looking at the list of Bishop's advisors and where there needs to be a refresh or indeed a new appointment. We are also looking at the various task groups that have long been a feature of fruitful missional engagement in this diocese, but which need some work to ensure they are working in a strategic and systemic way, with objectives, accountability and in some cases a timeline for their work and therefore a finite existence.

Finally, I ask us to listen to the prophetic cry of the 5<sup>th</sup> mark of mission. Six years ago, I visited a small village on the Fijian island Viti Levu. I travelled with Archbishop Winston Halapua a few hours north of the capital Suva, up the coast and inland, the latter part of the journey along a very bumpy road. When we arrived, we were greeted with singing, hospitality and a vibrancy of life and faith that was both humbling and inspiring. A cyclone had destroyed the majority of homes and buildings in the village, including the church at the heart of the community. Our task was to break ground and bless the site of their new church. Now there are two points from this: firstly, more frequent and extreme weather events affect the most vulnerable, and the knock-on impact of all of this is our challenge too. Secondly, a community with so few resources comparatively speaking exhibited a confidence and joyfulness in God that surely reminds us that we are called to be confident and joyful too: drawn by hope, not driven by fear and filled with grace. Turning outwards in mission and growing younger and more diverse will change us. None of this is about finding people to be more like us. Bringing and being Christ to those with whom we have even the briefest of encounters will change who we are, and it will change the Church.

In his recent Presidential address to General Synod in York, Archbishop Stephen invited Synod to engage with the Lord's Prayer. He paid particular attention to the first word: '*Our*'. Many of the challenges and opportunities that we face locally and nationally as a Church, were faced by the earliest Christian communities, and these challenges and opportunities ask us to attend to common life, how we collaborate, share, learn from one another's differences. The disciples are in the same boat not different boats according to their preferences. One thing that Jesus does say to the disciples in the boat is to cast their net on the other side. As we seek to faithfully follow Christ in this season, in our communities and world full of complexity and issues of concern one of my many prayers for our diocese is that with courage and conviction and in our seeking, sharing and sending by casting our nets in new directions we will find fresh growth, renewed purpose and a deep sense of belonging for each and every person. We are all participants in our future, but we cannot expect others to fix a future for us without also rolling up our sleeves (and in some cases, rolling them up a bit more) and getting stuck in. I suspect the Apostle Paul might approve of such an aim, but not before reminding us that it is God who goes before us and therefore, we are to be a people of joy and hope in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.