

# **Together on the Way: A Document to Help Set the Agenda for Synod 2022**

## **Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ! Grace and Peace be with you all.**

In October of 2022, the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton will come together in a Synod – the 68<sup>th</sup> such gathering since our beginning. The meeting of Synod is the most important meeting of the diocese. Every parish will send its elected representatives, together with clergy and other appointed diocesan leaders. Some important work will be done there. Yet the Synod is much more than just a business meeting. It is also a spiritual way of living together as Christians. The word ‘synod,’ from Greek, means ‘together on the way,’ and this tells us something about what that more is. The Synod is people around the diocese meeting and praying with each other as a whole family of churches; it is an opportunity to hear and learn about other ministries that different people and congregations are involved in; it is a place to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Thus, while the Synod is also a meeting which makes decisions about policies and priorities that will serve to guide the life of the diocese, that business importantly happens upon this spiritual and relational ground. We are committed to discerning where God is at work in the world, and to join God there.

As we prepare to come together in Synod once again, I want to provide this document to help orient us to the road ahead. Over the last several months, I have been travelling around the diocese visiting with parishes, attending the committees of the diocese, reflecting about the state of the church with the leadership and with parishioners across the diocese, and of course I have been constantly praying. The document you have in your hand, is a synopsis of what I have heard and thought about. I wanted to reflect briefly on the challenges we face as well as some of the possible ways forward.

**I also know as bishop that I cannot not do this on my own. God calls all of us on this journey, and I need you to walk with me on the way.** You will see some of my first thoughts below, but then I will invite you into a process by which you will add your thoughts to the conversation, too. Together we will listen and sound out what the Spirit is saying, and together we will respond.

## **Who we are?**

Long before there was a Diocese of Edmonton, or the Anglican Church of Canada, or even a church at all, the land our church lives within and calls home was here. The area around our Alberta’s Capital Region has been a gathering place for thousands of years. It is known as Amiskwaciy Waskahikan (Beaver Hills) in the language of some of its longest inhabitants. This land itself can become part of the answer of who we are.

No matter how we may have come to live in this place – be you Indigenous, Colonial-Settler, or a more recent Newcomer – we are now all called upon here to live here as treaty people. I speak namely of Treaty 6 and Treaty 8. In their original spirit these are not mere legal agreements but rather sacred covenants that were intended to provide a basis for how to live together in a good way. Though they have often been broken, they remain instructive as another way of reminding us of who we are. Our church especially needs to know and name itself in this way.

Formed in 1913, the Diocese of Edmonton is one of 31 dioceses of the Anglican Church of Canada – a church which is itself a Province of the global Anglican Communion. A diocese is a group of churches gathered together in one geographical region. Within our diocese are many smaller groupings of Christian disciples who gather in particular neighborhoods or communities. We call these branches of our family tree parishes, of which our diocese presently has 48. Together we are led by many different gifted followers of Jesus who are serving as lay and ordained ministers in a variety of ways, including one bishop who seeks to be the companion and servant of all. Above all, of course, a diocese is people – redeemed sinners and pilgrim disciples of Jesus Christ seeking to be faithful in this time and place. Our predecessors have sought to live out the Gospel in this region for 109 years. God willing, we will continue to do the same in the years ahead.

## **What are our challenges and opportunities?**

Every generation of the Church of God has its own issues to face as they seek to live out the Gospel faithfully, and this is no different for us. As we approach October of this year, we face many challenges in our diocese. Many of these challenges are not unique to us but are felt across the whole of Anglican Church of Canada. Yet even in the challenges are also many new opportunities. God is not done with us yet!

### **Demographics**

One of the most obvious challenges that we face is that of changing demographics. In 1961, the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) recorded 1,300,000 Anglicans on the parish rolls. This was the high point of the ACC in terms of membership. Just 56 years later, in 2017, the ACC recorded 282,000 on the parish rolls. That is a significant decrease, and one which many of us have no doubt seen very clearly in our own parishes.

This challenge is not unique to the Anglican Church of Canada. There is a significant shift in Canada, and many other parts of the Northern and Western hemispheres, in terms of the numbers of Canadians who attend church of any kind on any regular basis. The era when some churches in this part of the world could take it for granted that all they needed to do was open the church building doors and people would show up is over. There are surely some losses and things to grieve in this fact. Yet, as we will see, there may also be positive lessons in it for us as well.

## **Buildings and Property**

Many of the buildings in our diocese are relatively historic buildings, most of them having been built fifty years ago or more. This means that, in 2022, many of our church buildings that are starting to show their age, with all the maintenance demands that come with that. The Property and Planning Committee is currently going through the diocese parish by parish to get an adequate assessment of our properties. It is likely that we are going to have to seek creative ways to access new sources of funding and alternative revenue streams to ensure that the physical infrastructure which the parishes and our diocese is blessed with can continue to be assets to living the Gospel and serving our neighbors rather than a burden and a drain. While this will certainly call for some difficult adjustments, we must remember that it may also open new ministry and partnership possibilities as well.

## **Finances**

Finances across the diocese overall are in good shape. There are, however, some serious issues to be aware of. Most of our parishes felt the pinch of diminished giving through the time of COVID-19. However, with great generosity, and other government supports, it was not as bad as it could have been. Still, most churches are having to rethink their budgets going into 2022 and beyond. Insurance costs have gone up dramatically, and there is not a single parish that is not having some financial challenges this year. It is also important to note that we have many clergy who are not able to have a full-time stipend, and this is another situation we will need to find a solution to.

There are also challenges at the diocesan level coming up at the end of 2022. One of these will be the fact that the reserve of previously raised money in the Rural Ministry Initiative fund will run out, meaning that certain congregations whose budgets have been subsidized by diocesan funds will no longer be able to rely on this support. Another reserve of money called the Diocesan Development Fund can only be drawn down to a certain level to support ministry. That threshold of available revenue will not last beyond the end of 2023 if current spending rates see no changes. We will make changes, of course, but it is important to note.

## **Spirituality**

One of the significant trends to watch in North American demographics is the rise of the religiously unaffiliated. Canadian society overall is attending church services much less often, and there is a rising group of people who are not affiliated with any church or religion at all. However, this is not to say that they have become atheistic or have no interest in matters of faith. Rather, more and more people are now finding religious connection in other ways. Part of this new demographic refers to themselves as the 'Spiritual But Not Religious.' These are people who engage in spiritual life but who have rejected institutional religion. This group is growing rapidly. We can view this as an obstacle to the Church as an institution, and no doubt in some ways it is. Yet here too there is an invitation to us as followers of Jesus to return to our ancient sources and our ways of being in ages past where we may find renewed means of connection and conversation with the spiritually seeking of our time.

## **Sins of the Church**

Part of the reason that many people have rejected institutional religion has been due to the sins of the institutional church. There are many issues in our past that we need to repent and learn from in order to become a healthier church. For instance, every denomination is having to come to terms with the fallout of sexual abuse and lack of transparency in rooting it out, and many dioceses in our own church have both historic and recent cases brought against them. Another issue that we have to grapple with is the long-term responsibility we have from our participation in the residential school system and the church's larger attempt to erase and destroy indigenous relationships and identity. We also have a past as well as ongoing discrimination against the LGBTQ community. We have made commitments around all of these issues. We need to ensure that we honor and live out these commitments in a life-giving way, so that we do what is necessary to repair and make amends.

## **Our Way Moving Forward:**

While our challenges are many, I believe that this is a profoundly exciting time to be the Church. We have a front row seat in being a part of what God is doing in our time. The events of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have been deeply formative for us. We have gained tremendous insight into the depths of Jesus' Gospel through our renewed engagement with science and psychology, through deeper understanding of the scriptural traditions through biblical studies, through greater dialogue with other denominations of the Church and learning from the wisdom other spiritual and faith communities, through meditating on the experiences of Christians and others through the horrific events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century like Apartheid and the Holocaust, and through a return of awareness to the necessity of the ministry of all of the baptized. These are just some examples. We stand at beginning of a new chapter in Christian history. I believe that later historians will see this moment as another Reformation. This may sound daunting, but there is a reason the command most often given in scripture is "do not be afraid." The uncertain future will be a time of great renewal for our church, and the Holy Spirit is stirring us up even now. Below is a list of a few things that I think will help us make a start.

### **An Inspired People**

At the heart of our life together is a message of amazing grace and the joy of the Gospel. The scriptures tell us that God loves us and the world so much that God sent the Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is God come amongst us to heal the world and make it whole through his birth, life, death, and resurrection. Because God has walked with us in the flesh, continues to be with us by the Holy Spirit, we can trust that we are never alone. God is constantly healing us, transforming us, guiding us, and inviting us to partner with God to show that same generous grace to all people.

But Christianity is also more than a message. It is a way of life. It is a renewed encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is God's invitation to true freedom in Christ – freedom to love without limits and to willingly give of ourselves in service to the needs of others. Christians learn to live here and now in light of eternity. We believe that when we center our

lives on Christ, we find a way to live fully human lives and it enables us to build authentic communities which are inclusive of all people. What we are talking about here is becoming people who not only know about Jesus but who live Jesus-shaped lives, and I believe an intentional return to the path of discipleship will be a major priority of the diocese in the years to come. It is a simple truth that our churches flourish and thrive when they are made up of people who are inspired, who have their hearts on fire. We want to encourage and nurture spiritual vitality across the diocese.

To this end, we are forming a group to prayerfully discern what we might offer as a diocese to assist parishes and individuals in their discipleship journey. This could range from spiritual retreats, to teaching on ways of prayer, to renewal weekends, to small discipleship groups, to speaker conferences, just to name a few ideas. Another possibility might be something like a diocesan-wide ‘rhythm of life’ – a basic set of regular commitments we would all undertake together as we deepen our faith. There are numerous communities already doing amazing work that we can utilize. One good example is from The Episcopal Church in the USA, and the simple daily discipleship framework called The Way of Love. Ultimately, it is not the specific program that is important but finding ways for people to know themselves as beloved by God and to grow in love of God and love of neighbour. Anything else we might do will only bear fruit if it begins from that base.

Related to this call to intentional discipleship is the need for renewal of the ministry of all the baptized. One of the exciting parts about this new chapter in the life of our church has been the increased understanding that ministry is a calling for the whole people of God and not just for the ordained. The Church is not fully the Church until every member of the Church is empowered to exercise the fullness of their role in the Church. Helping all the parts of our diocesan body to discover their gifts and find their vocations will also be an increasingly essential task for us.

### **A People Engaged with the World**

One of the great insights of our time is the recognition that God is always at work, both inside and outside of our churches. Our job is to go out of the church, find where God is active, and join God in that work. This is what we mean by the word *missional*. As Jeremiah told the exiles, we are called to seek the peace and prosperity of the towns in which we live. Jesus called us out to proclaim the good news of God’s salvation. Christians were never meant to only engage their faith within their churches alone. This is one of the many gifts that Bishop Jane’s leadership animated in our diocese, and it is one we can continue. Churches have seen this bear fruit in traditional ways of engagement, such becoming more invitational churches, Messy Church offerings for people of all ages, and other fresh expressions of prayer the Jesus way such as the Indigenous Standing Stones liturgy. We have training programs like the lay evangelists to help us find gifts to help people explore conversations around faith and life. Others have taken steps in finding new and creative ways connection with the community through things like community gardens, musical, visual, and dramatic arts, food security and meal programs, and much more. We need to invest in leadership and faith-growing opportunities for youth. To be a missional church is to be an outward-focused and other-focused church.

Yet we must also remember that the Spirit of God is not at work only in and through things that begin in our churches. Sometimes churches have acted as if that were true – not least among the First Peoples of Turtle Island – and that has done harm. Part of the Good News we know in Jesus is that God’s grace abounds in all creation and is drawing all people towards the fulness of reconciled life. Therefore, we should live in such a way as to expect that God will surprise us with partners and companions on the journey who have their own wisdom to share and lessons to teach. Engagement with the world can therefore mean listening to and receiving from others just as much as we share the gifts that God has given to us.

## **A Just People**

Our call to be a just church comes from our call to care about the suffering of the world as well as from our robust theological vision of human flourishing. The theme of justice runs through both the Old and New Testaments. The prophet Amos tells us to let justice flow like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The Gospel, therefore, is not only about our own spiritual transformation and newness of life, but also the transformation of human social relationships and indeed of all the earth.

Part of the Gospel is a message about the creation of a new kind of community in the world. Jesus spoke about a different kinship, where we are related to others in ways that go beyond the categories and boundaries of the world. Paul describes it like this in his letter to the Galatians: It is a community “where there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The Nihayaw people of this land speak of it as *wakhotowin*. In each case, it is a revelation of a renewed and equal society where the hierarchical divisions of the world are healed. It is a vision that we have often failed at spectacularly and are still very much learning how to live out. To be a just diocese is to be committed to this vision of a beloved community.

At a practical level, this means several things. One is a commitment to being a safe church. To be a safe church at minimum means that we uphold values and maintain policies and procedures that protect all people from acts of abuse or other kinds of violence and oppression, and especially those who are vulnerable. We are committed to working for equality for all and for working against the systemic evils that harm people such as sexism, racism, discrimination against the LGBTQ community, ableism and the unrestrained exploitation of the earth. These are not just political issues of the moment, but rather key spiritual tasks that God tells us ought to be at the heart of what we do. All of this is part of the creation of this new kind of kinship established in Jesus Christ.

## **A Collegial People**

The only way that any of this will work is if it is built on a foundation of healthy relationships within the diocese. To say that someone or something is collegial is, in a literal sense of the word, to speak about a capacity to exist in healthy partnership. All over in the New Testament Jesus sends people out as partners – pairs, or trios, or other kinds of groups (the 7, the 12, the 72, etc.). The letters of Paul to the earliest churches often open with him naming groups and teams of several different people who jointly serve as hosts and leaders within them. The Church is

always people, therefore good relationships matter for being Church. When we know each other, when we respect each other, we have a firm foundation for serving together.

A healthy collegiality has to be supported by good systems that ensure clear communication and common understandings. I firmly believe that clarity is kindness. It is always better to be transparent about policies and expectations, even around things like governance, conflict, and discipline. That is why, by October, the diocese will complete a full overview of all our policies around things like hiring, human resources, boundaries training, Safe Church protocols, record keeping and financial management, and more.

Sometimes, the office of bishop has also been distorted by a misunderstanding of orders and the nature of ministerial leadership. Implicitly, bishops have been assumed to sit alone at the top of a clericalism pyramid based on hierarchical rank. This type of leadership does not serve to create a collegial culture, and I am committed to pursuing another way with many other leaders and voices as partners in the episcopal task. One facet of this will be to recover a greater role in discernment and governance for the regions of the diocese known as deaneries, with both lay and clergy voices shaping their work. I regularly meet with a group of experienced and trusted leaders in the diocese that is being called the Episcopate Circle – a small group who functions as a source of collective council for me in my ministry as bishop. I also look forward to seeing us expand our understanding of the role of the elected body known the Executive Council, which I hope can animate an ongoing appreciation for the synodal nature of our church.

I believe this collegial principle may also come to inform the way we think about relationships between clusters of parishes and regional areas of our diocese, perhaps leading us to think more about new models of team ministry instead of every parish trying to carry on all on their own. I would also add that this kind of partnership is not just about exploring intra-Anglican but rather seeking to take every opportunity to share in ministry as much as possible with our fellow siblings in the Body of Christ rather than existing in a denominational silo unto ourselves.

## **Over to You:**

In all of this I have tried to share with you some of what I think God is up to, and some of the things we are likely going to need to think about and address in the coming months and years. But, as I said at the beginning, I need to find out where each of you are at in this conversation, too. That is why this outline comes with some questions for you to dig into further as well with the people of your parish – to share back with me the ‘lay of the land’ in the Diocese of Edmonton as it appears from where you stand. There is the chance to reflect on this by yourself and to give us feedback. But I am also hoping that parishes will engage with this in conversation groups as well as clericus groups. However, you do it, I look forward to hearing from you. As I receive your input, this will serve to guide our further reflection, and I will draw on that wisdom to help us craft the agenda for what we need to talk about and act on in Synod together this fall.

These questions are just to get you started. There are no right or wrong answers. You may find they take you in all kinds of different directions than the ones I’ve listed so far. What is important is that you talk to each other, you listen to each other, and then you pass your message on. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Question 1) What resonated with you or didn't resonate about the challenges I wrote about in your own experience? As a reminder they were about changing demographics, buildings and property, finances, spirituality and the sins of the church.

Question 2) What other significant challenges would you highlight for our church in the coming years?

Question 3) What resonated with you about the themes I spoke about? The themes of being An Inspired People, An Engaged People, A Just People, and A Collegial People.

Question 4) What didn't resonate with your experience about the themes, and what would you say instead were our themes in the coming years?