

*The Rt. Rev. Stephen London, Bishop of Edmonton  
Charge to the 68th Synod of the Diocese of Edmonton  
October 21, 2022, All Saints' Cathedral, Edmonton*

It is wonderful to see you here tonight for the 68th Synod of the Diocese of Edmonton. I have been looking forward to this moment for a long time, and I want to take a moment to say thank you from the bottom of my heart to so many people who have made this whole event possible. Seeing it on the planning end, make me triply appreciative of the amount of work that makes this work.

As you know, our theme is Together on the Way. More than a theme, Together on the Way is a way to live out the gospel in our time and place. That is what I want to talk about tonight. I think traditionally, charges from the Bishop are meant to be complicated. Mine is not. It is really one very simple message: we, you, and I are walking together with Christ doing the work of the Gospel. Walking together of course is a metaphor. I remember when my father died in 2017. There was a lot going on in my life, and I felt completely overwhelmed with the work in the parish and stuff going on in my family and the need to settle my father's estate as the only child, not to mention just grieving my dad who had been such a part of my life. I felt so alone. But I found out I wasn't. People came alongside me from 101 different directions; encouraging me, praying for me and with me, taking on tasks, taking others away from me, and giving me space. They walked alongside me, and I have never forgotten it, ever. That is what I mean by us walking together.

We are in a new time and place. There is no question that this is a challenging time to be the church. I have spoken to members of every single church in this diocese, and not one of them has said "we have no problems; we don't need anything." Every parish has challenges and many of those are universal. The struggle coming out of covid and finding volunteers, the pressure in rural communities on small churches, rising costs, and a shortage of clergy. I think we see clearly now that the idea of a solo congregation is long gone. We can't do this on our own. And we never should have. As Jesus people, we are always called to good relations with each other and the world. And we need to do it humbly; we need to pray together, and we need to be kind to each other; and we need to serve the world in Jesus' name. That I think is being Together on the Way.

Now we are an institutional church and to be in good order and to have a framework for us to live together, over the next two days we will be attending to many important matters in the form of resolutions. We will be looking at updating sections of our canons and constitution. We will be looking to see if we can articulate a will of the synod. And there are some complex procedural ways to do that in order to honour all the voices in our midst. But we cannot forget the simple truth that we are doing this work of the gospel together for our time and place. We are Together on the Way.

I do want to just leave it there, but as this is the charge, I feel the need to flesh this out a bit because if I were you, I would ask, 'Steve, what do you mean by the Gospel in our time and place?' And I would answer like this:

We are a Gospel people. We proclaim the Gospel; we are formed by the Gospel; the Gospel is our vision for life. In our document called *Finding Our Way*, we have reaffirmed the truth that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is at the center of our life. There is no other center than Jesus. The Gospel is not easy to define because it is an experience. For the first followers of Jesus, it was more of an experience than words on a page. For Peter, it was being reconciled by Jesus AFTER the betrayal. For Mary Magdalene, it was an experience of deep healing. For the Samaritan woman, it was the experience of being accepted despite her past and being outside of Judaism. For John, it was being able to be close to Jesus. I could go on and on, but the Gospel has always been first and foremost the experience of the love of God given through Jesus Christ. And so, the Gospel proclamation is always an invitation to personally encounter the love and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. We want people to not just hear that they are loved, but to know that love. That they are beloved children of God because love is what heals the human heart.

The Gospel is the proclamation that in the life, teachings, death, resurrection, and continuing presence of Christ, the power of sin and death has been destroyed. Hearts are set free. All of creation is being renewed and healed. We now have the opportunity, being justified by Christ and renewed by his spirit, to live in a new and good way, a way that is for this life here and now, and for the life to come in eternity. It is the way of love. It is all about good and right relationships, relationships marked by Shalom. The church was always meant to be a sign and symbol of God's vision for all of creation. To live well together in reconciled diversity. The love of God transcends all of our divisions and envisions healing all of our divisions so that we see clearly, the eyes of our hearts healed so that we can see that we are all children of God. This is a good way. God loves all people. No exceptions.

### **The Gospel is at the center.**

And we need to live it out here and now. When we say that we are *on the way* it means that we have not fully arrived. We are incomplete. Christians have always wrestled with what the Gospel means in their time and place in every generation. Sometimes they have done this well; sometimes they have betrayed the Gospel. Sometimes they have done both. We are in a unique position to learn from our history. That is why in our *Finding our Way* document we have chosen five principles or themes that help us to understand how we are called to live the Gospel here and now.

Our first two themes are Transforming Discipleship and A Calling for All. We know that in this day and this time, the church is only going to flourish and thrive if everyone is fully activated in their life in Christ. We no longer have the resources to be a fully clericalized church, and that... is... a... good... thing. The priesthood of all the baptized has always been a calling of the church, but the reality is that over the centuries this vision of a fully Christian life for all has been blunted because of the institutionalism of the church. This institutionalism has in fact taken away this whole vision of Christian life for everyone and focused it on the church hierarchy. We can see this evolution in church buildings that still have a rood screen. When I was in Canterbury this summer, I marveled at the beauty of the rood screen... while simultaneously cringing because I knew that its purpose was to keep the laity from the sacred mysteries. The laity was not seen as worthy to touch the bread and so it was placed directly on people's tongues with holy hands. And so over time, ministry evolved into something that the clergy did, and the laity were just passive

recipients of a holy mystery. This is obviously a distortion of the Gospel, and every generation has tried to work against it, but we have never been completely successful in that. In our time, we are again trying to live into that. We need to be a church that encourages everyone to be a disciple of Christ and to discern the calling God has for them. And I feel that we are starting to see a real revival of life with God in the community.

The third and fourth themes are Outward Focus and Collaborative Partnerships. This is another discernment of the much bigger church. This is the term missional. The insight here is that God doesn't only work within the four walls of the church. In fact, God doesn't even do the best work in the church. God is always seeking the hurting and the lost, and God is calling us out to join God. As we find the courage to partner in our communities with other church groups as well as secular partners, people of other faiths, community groups, and more for the common good, we are finding that our people are engaged and finding renewed energy. Bridges are built and new possibilities are discerned. The time for us to stay in our churches and just go this alone is over. That is a recipe for tiredness and frustration. We are looking for energy and connection as we work for the welfare of the community in which we live. We are a church because God has a mission, a mission to heal and make whole through Jesus Christ.

And finally, our last theme is All Relations. I personally believe we are in the middle of a second great reformation. That is debatable of course, but I think our transformations are that significant. Like the first reformation, it is marked by going back and searching the scriptures. And our questions in our time and place are relational. What is the good news for people on the margins? What do the scriptures really say about race, gender, and about sexuality? Our time has been forced to confront the fact that in many places our ancestors have read the scriptures wrong and done horrible damage. The church has used the scriptures to keep marginal people marginalized. Sharon Harper, author of *The Very Good Gospel*, tells about how she discovered that the Gospel she had been taught as a girl was a very thin gospel. It was just about faith and getting into heaven. But one day, her faith had a crisis moment. She realized, "I had to face a hard truth: my limited understanding of the gospel had nothing to say about sixteen thousand Cherokees and four other sovereign indigenous nations whose people were forcibly removed from their lands. And it had nothing to say to my own ancestors who were enslaved in South Carolina... If one's gospel falls mute when facing people who need good news the most – the impoverished, the oppressed, and the broken – then it's no gospel at all."

What does the gospel sound like to the people who are the most marginalized in our communities? This has been the question of our times. Because in European-based settings, Christianity has been the religion of the powerful and was utilized for keeping people in their place. This is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we are in the process of changing and finding a new and better way. But this requires all relations. This is why reconciliation and reparation of the relationship with the first peoples of this land is of such a high priority to us today. We need to show that the gospel doesn't have to be about colonial power and the attempted erasing of the first peoples. For that, we have great sorrow and repentance. We need to show that the Gospel is about good relationship and new partnerships. This is why we have said that we have a call to be a community of justice and right relationship which includes our relations with the land, the waters, and all creation.

Together on the Way – this is not complex. In the Gospel this evening, we read the story of the two disciples walking with Jesus. They do not recognize them, but he walks with them and explains the scriptures. At the end, as he breaks the bread, their eyes are opened and they recognized Jesus. This story has always been a well-beloved image for the church. We walk with each other, and Christ walks with us, he opens the scriptures to us; he opens our eyes. My friends, let us be that church. Were not our hearts burning within us?