

## **MIDWEEK MESSAGE – Bishop Julian Henderson 12 February 2021**

I don't know if you have caught sight of the current debate in the national press and the Spectator magazine? It's about where the Church of England is and has been during the pandemic. We have been criticised for wanting to dismantle the parish system, make clergy redundant, centralise everything and be online rather do church in person.

Our Archbishops have responded with a robust defense, arguing very convincingly that we are still very much in business and doing all that core work that has characterised our ministry from one generation to the next.

Yes, we have not always got it right, and we must be the first to hold up our hands and admit our failings. That has been very evident in the case of safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. Recent reports reveal frightening accounts of abuse and there are still other reviews to come.

So our defence of the church cannot be complacent or arrogant, but it does need to tell the true story, so that the message people here is not false and one sided, but balanced and accurate.

The Archbishops have said and I quote: we have been burying the dead, comforting the bereaved, feeding the hungry and praying for the nation and the world. There are no plans to dismantle the parish network. We are called to be a Christian presence in every community. Huge efforts are being made in our poorest urban and rural areas. And we are not cutting back on clergy numbers. This year we have seen the biggest rise in lay and ordained vocations for a quarter of a century.

Yes, as is true of every organisation that is going through the pandemic, we are looking at how we can be more effective in our mission. Various work streams around Vision and Strategy, Governance, Transforming Effectiveness and Episcopal ministry, are underway and will be reporting to the House of Bishops and General Synod. Given the shakeup that the Pandemic has given to the nation, it is inevitable and wise that the church gets itself ready for the next chapter of our mission. The Archbishops quote the theologian Hans Kung, who once observed that:

To stay the same when everything else around you changes is not to stay the same.

The Archbishops also said: There have always been those who have wanted to undermine the credibility of the church of Jesus Christ. It was ever thus. That should not drive us to despair, but rather galvanise us to be on the front foot and so live out the Gospel life that opponents find their accusations slipping away in the face of the evidence.

Jesus warned His first followers that they should beware if all people spoke well of them. In fact the Scriptures imply that if believers are faithful to what God has revealed, they shall be persecuted. And while this current opposition is nothing compared with what some of our brothers and sisters experience elsewhere in the world, it is no surprise that potshots are being fired at the Archbishop and the church as an institution.

That is why making Church healthy is so key and at the heart of Vision 2026. Unashamedly we strive to be a community centred around Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth, a fellowship of the Spirit, a beacon of light and love. That means we must offer God worship that is in spirit and truth, whether in person or on line, we make ourselves and others disciples of Jesus, we are witnesses to the Gospel, we grow leaders for the future and we inspire children and young people to embrace the life of faith.

As a Diocese we have set our hand to this plough and we will not look back.