



**THE
DIOCESE
OF
BLACKBURN**
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN LANCASHIRE

The Bishop of Blackburn
The Rt Revd Julian T Henderson

7th March 2022

An open letter to the Diocese of Blackburn

Dear friends across the diocese,

I have been overwhelmed by the many kind expressions of your concern and prayer in recent weeks. Thank you all so much. I am very pleased to say that I have been able to be back at work since February 21st, without pain or painkillers, but needing to be careful and waiting for some of the effects of the sciatica to disappear. I am deeply grateful to God for the way my surgery was funded by the NHS, by a surgeon I know and without having to wait for months.

So it is good to be able to return to a normal working pattern and I am very grateful to those who have had to take on extra responsibilities; for Bishop Philip for holding the fort and for Sam overseeing the work at Bishop's House.

Being made to step aside from much of the day to day work for a short period was an interesting and salutary experience. Inevitably some things still had to be dealt with, but I learnt that none of us are indispensable in the team and the work carried on apace while I was off. God has blessed us richly with such an able and competent team across the diocese and it was good to hand over areas of work to others. We all need to be reminded from time to time that it is the Lord's work we are doing and it doesn't belong to any one person.

The full programme of Diocesan events for Lent says it all. Clergy Study Mornings this year on the theme of inspiring children and young people; a day of fasting and prayer for vocations on March 8th; a children and family workers conference; the Abide youth gathering at the end of March; about 10,000 copies of a lent devotional, Signs of Life, distributed to parishes; a beacon course about church planting; a learning community for those wanting to develop work among young people.

Then there is a festival of life and faith and the launch of The Vine Community in the Cathedral on March 19th, and on March 26th an open Synod meeting with the First Estates Commissioner of the Church Commissioners giving a keynote address and in the rest of the morning a focus on the launch of the Parish Giving Scheme and our work among children and young people.

All of these initiatives are about resourcing the great work across the diocese in parishes and chaplaincies, enabling it to grow, develop and thrive. As I have said many times, it feels like a time of God's favour and that has been borne out by the generosity of the national church in supporting our SDF projects.

So it may seem strange for you to hear me say today that after nearly nine years I have decided to retire at the end of August this year after the Lambeth Conference of Bishops from around the Anglican Communion. The Queen has been informed and my deed of resignation has been countersigned by the Archbishop of York. The timing of this announcement has been determined by a number of factors, not least the conclusion of the five clergy study days a couple of days ago on Saturday.

God willing, my plan is to hand over my Diocesan Pastoral Staff to the Dean in the Cathedral for safe keeping on July 16th after a short Diocesan Synod earlier that morning. I can't quite express how I feel about this, as I would love to stay, do more, be around for the Diocesan conference in October and remain part of the extraordinary story of what God is doing in the Church of England in Lancashire in the ongoing implementation of Vision 2026. However, my plan all along has been to ensure the Vision is not tied too tightly to me as a person and is owned by the diocese. I don't need to be present to see it continue. We have an amazing team who are more than able to carry on the next phase of the work.

In fact about 18 months ago I read those solemn words of Jesus to Peter in Matthew 16.23, 'You are a stumbling block to Me' and I resolved then that I would try to make sure that I would not get in the way of Jesus and His work, be a stumbling block, not overstay, nor understay my time here. The last thing I want is to slow down or obstruct what He wants to do here in Lancashire. In one sense there is never a good time to leave, but I shall be 68 this summer and after 43 years of ministry in the Church of England it is right to step aside, allow someone else to take on this exciting and significant role in Lancashire and for Heather and I to be able to spend more time with our family in Sussex and friends around the country.

Obviously the next six months are going to be very full with several big signposts about our support for mission, lay leadership and hospitality, in addition to all the normal things in the diary. We will welcome the Archbishop of York for three days of mission and engagement at the end of May. The admission of churchwardens this year will take place at two Primary Visitations in June and I am grateful to the Archdeacons for their agreement that I as Diocesan bishop may affirm the role of lay leadership by leading the admission this year. At the end of June we shall host a series of hospitality events in a ten day Tent Week at Bishops House, followed closely by ordinations in the Cathedral.

I plan to finish as I started in 2013, with a short prayer visit to each Deanery in early July and my office here will be in touch with Area Deans to make arrangements. This will be to give thanks to God for the blessings He has bestowed in the last nine years and to look to Him afresh for what lies ahead.

You will see this news conveyed to the Diocese and beyond in a number of ways over the coming days and weeks and no doubt I will have opportunities to share the reasons behind my decision with others as I have with you all today. Blackburn Diocese in its recently elected Vacancy in See Committee will begin the process of working out a profile of the sort of Bishop the Diocese seeks for the next part of its pilgrimage, the kind of person they believe God wants to call and send here. Bishop Jill has been elected by the Bishop's Council to Chair that committee. Please pray for her and the Committee as they begin their work on behalf of the diocese.

In the mean time I have asked Bishop Philip to step up once more and the diocesan bishop's powers will be delegated to him during the vacancy. He will be supported by an excellent and willing wider team and, I am sure, by you all. It has been agreed that Stephen Whittaker will also continue to work as Interim Diocesan Secretary for a further period of 2 years. This will bring stability in the short term over the vacancy and then allow the next Diocesan Bishop once in place to make an appointment according to their plans. I am very grateful for Stephen's willingness, with the Board of Education's support, to serve the diocese in this way and extend what has been an excellent beginning in this interim role.

Finally, as I thank you all for your love and prayer over the last nine years (and I will have much more to say about that in due course) be assured of Heather and my prayers for this very special diocese. May the churches of Blackburn Diocese be increasingly healthy, transforming their local communities and bringing to Jesus the glory and praise He deserves.

With my thanks and prayers,

As ever

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Julian". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.