

Primus Charge to General Synod 2014

Jesus is present with his disciples. I sometimes say that we are called to be a community of disciples and not an institution with members. Jesus is present with his disciples. But they are afraid – and we say every time we approach the confession of our sins that ‘there is no fear in love’. He shares peace with them. He breathes on them the breath of the spirit. They become a God-breathed group of people – forgiven and forgiving. And that is what we are called to be – whether at worship, in pastoral care, in mission and service, in Vestry Meetings – and in General Synod.

When you reflect on what it means for a church to be God-breathed and spirit-filled, your first thought may be of energy for mission. As a church, we are showing that we have that. Increasingly we are able to overcome anxiety, to transcend both our apparent lack of resources and the congregationalism in which we see only ourselves. But it also means that we receive the spirit of healing - constantly aware of our relationships and the pain which we cause to one another in our disunity. And beyond that is the spirit of truth - becoming aware that our pictures of truth tend to be partial. We are like a jigsaw where all of us have some of the pieces. The ability to speak and to hear the truth about one another and ourselves is part of how God's spirit moves among us.

We face exciting challenges in our life as a church. I want briefly to highlight three as we begin our Synod.

The first is to mention the scale of the changes which we are putting in place this year. The new Scottish Episcopal Institute – the new shape of Mission Board - these are probably the most significant organisational changes for a generation. And they complement one another. The Whole Church Policy places the focus of missional energy in our dioceses and congregations under the leadership of our bishops as leaders of mission. That is the church for which the new Scottish Episcopal Institute will train people. We are thinking here about the next generation – about holding in our life the younger people whom God is calling to ministry. This training will be formation-led - preparing those who will serve in authorised ministries spiritually and intellectually – but also in terms of the shaping of character and temperament and professional skills

We are now within one hundred days of the Referendum on Scottish Independence. It's a hugely important choice for this society. The question on the ballot paper is political and constitutional. Churches and faith groups have therefore felt that we should be impartial. We have within our church people who on either side of this debate. They are entitled to be so. We are a Scottish Church – deeply embedded in the story of Scotland. Whether Scotland's future lies inside or outside the United Kingdom, we shall remain a Scottish Church

We may be impartial on the Referendum question itself – but not passive in our concern for the kind of society which Scotland will be in the years to come. There is an active debate going on about the place of faith in any new Scotland which may emerge – and in particular about the place of faith in a written constitution – and we are part of that conversation. The Church of Scotland conducted a talking process across Scotland and reported the views of the people who took part in this way: ‘the adversarial frames that dominate political and media discourse were largely absent; instead we found a deep concern for our neighbours, a focus on the local community, the future of children and young people, and a longing for a more peaceful and sustainable world.’

There is one other reason why churches and faith groups should act carefully in this debate. Where I come from, people make assumptions that members of a particular church will have particular views on politics or constitutional matters. That's why I am uncomfortable when people call us the English

Church. The implication is that we may be less Scottish or less Christian than others – when in fact it is our desire to serve this community and all its people whatever the outcome of the Referendum. The passing of the Marriage and Civil Partnership [Scotland] Act 2014 is a very significant event. We are living through rapid societal change. This is a challenge for all churches – and for us – because we hold within our life a number of very different ways of looking at these issues. Those different ways honour different approaches to our understanding of the authority of scripture; they honour a passion for justice and inclusion; they honour understandings of holiness of life, they honour Jesus whose ministry included rather than excluded. All churches carry those strands of faith tradition woven and interwoven in different ways. The challenge for us is a spiritual one – it is to find out what it means to live in our context faithfully and to live in our context together. We are very aware of the diversity of the Anglican Communion – but our first duty is to explore and respond to our own diversity while staying in relationship as a community of disciples bound together in the love of God.

We sometimes say that this Pentecost season is the beginning of the age of the church. It's the moment when anxious disciples are filled with the Spirit and become people of energy, courage and truth. May God bless us in our meeting this week and may his will be done in us.

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