



Bishop William Cliff, Charge to Synod 2025

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!¹ It has been exactly 18 months and 17 days since I was installed as the Bishop of Ontario and I am grateful to the diocese for all its loving care for me and for the very warm welcome I have received from the parishes and people. I have not yet made it into every church building, but I am working hard to see that I have been to every parish grouping.

That passage from acts is a favourite of mine. Peter and John and the man lame from birth at the beautiful gate. To me it is filled with the power and joy of the apostolic age and a church that was expanding and growing as numbers were added to them daily. In contrast, I wonder how many of us here, who are deeply interested in the life of the church, look at ourselves in the mirror (figuratively or literally) and say, I am just like the guy laying at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple...I love this place, I have been here most of my life, but I still can't quite walk.

And no matter how well we worship, or how well we pack the place and put on our vestments and sing our hymns, there is a nagging sense that something's not right and that somehow it is up to us to "fix it". The usual sturdy, practical Anglican way of "try a little harder", or "pray a little more", study scripture more assiduously, or organize more education programs, have more parish suppers (and in a typical Anglican attempt at revising holy tradition, switch from peas to corn at the parish supper), proclaim better festivals and work more frantically; perhaps if we do this, we will get back some of that glory which we all remember, which seems to have departed².

¹Philippians 1.2

²1 Samuel 4.21

Isaiah was speaking to a people in exile, broken and dispirited in how they were ever going to be who they once had been. They had a memory of who they were...but they needed a teacher to show them how to become who they were called to be. The Lord had actually spoken to the people and said “in returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength.” But God notes that clearly that was not a strategy the Israelites in exile had chosen. Instead they were, to paraphrase, “riding off in all directions” only to find that their pursuers were just as fast if not faster. The whole nation, instead of being a beacon to the world was shrunk down to be no more than a stick on top of a mountain—pointing nowhere and doing nothing. The ancient people of Israel figured they needed to do more of what they were doing before, and then God would be pleased.

But the Prophet disabused them of that idea! Isaiah reminds us that the Lord desperately wants to be gracious to us, that He wants to rise up and be merciful—but that, like a frantic child with too many toys or too much to do, looking to and fro, we think it is up to us to figure it out. Isaiah reminds us that we have a teacher in the Lord, who will correct us and gently reminds us, this is the way, walk in it.

This is not news to us, Isaiah chapter 30 has been there all along, but for some reason, right now, we are all surrounded by the need to have God show us the way forward. How are we going to “do” church in the coming decades. In the conversations we have been having since I came to the diocese, the level of anxiety about the future has been a constant, but coupled with that is the worry that we will not have the people, or the resources, or the clergy, or the will or the energy to keep it all going.

More often than not, when we talk about church life, we begin a litany of loss—we are not the church we were in you name the year. Like the prophet Haggai who addressed the Israelites returned from exile as they confronted the rubble that was their beloved temple; he asks: “Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now?”³

The book of Haggai exists as an encouragement to the people to get on with the business of building the temple. To sink foundations in order to do the work of the Lord. This is what I believe we are called to do as well.

Beloved, we have had too much of the discourse of decline. We have feasted on the words of the prophets of doom. We look around our churches, we look at what was, and we grieve it and wonder how do we get back there, to those days of busy Sunday schools and youth groups and women’s organizations or men’s groups. Where have all the bible studies and prayer groups gone? We ask.

³Haggai 2:3

But that whole story of decline hearkens back to a society that no longer exists and a church that I am sure none of us want to replicate. It would be madness for us to re-tool the church to serve the communities as if it was 1965, or 1975 or even 1985. That would be madness. So why are we thinking and living “back there”?

Nothing I am about to say is meant as disrespect to those who have gone before us. Anyone who knows me, knows I am not looking to throw shade on the faithfulness of those who have “borne the heat of the day”⁴. To be frank though, we don’t want the church of 40, or 50 or 60 years ago, but we do want their resources. We are yearning for the easy access to homes and schools and the bank accounts and the generous donors on whose historic gifts we are depending today. We certainly don’t want to relive the arguments from back then. I don’t think we want to relitigate the attitudes toward divorce, or position of women, or old accepted tropes about Indigenous people or the condemnation of LGBT persons from back then. Not really, but what we are hearkening back to the sense of plenty—the resources, human and financial to extend the kingdom that we used to have.

The truth is that the things that people are missing and all the resources that we are pining for are connected to a time when we were the chaplain to the empire. We had a natural position in polite society. We should not be pining for those days, because it is deep within human nature to romanticize the past. The Church we are longing for exists mostly in our minds. Those who lived through those days will tell you it was not easier and the solutions to problems were no more apparent. (As Bob Marley said in “redemption song”, we must emancipate ourselves from mental slavery).

So—because there is no going back, let’s all agree that we give up the talk about what “used to be” and begin to pray, plan and pursue the vision of the Kingdom that the church must face right now, for the church of the 2020s—and even then remember that we are already half way through this decade twenties. It is time to retool the church for the mission in front of us, rather than mourn the fact that we don’t have what the previous generations had. If those previous generations were here, they would tell us that it was NOT as easy as we think and that they faced terrible, wrenching decisions in their day which they made by the light which the Lord had given them. It is time to let them rest and face the society around us in 2025 and speak the Gospel truth of transforming grace for people today.

The interesting thing about Isaiah, is that as much as the people of Isarel are yearning to return to the land of their ancestors and yearning for the temple they remember, God isn’t necessarily interested in giving them back what they had. God is trying to get them to see that there might be a new way. God wants a new relationship which will be the post exile, post “what was” Israel.

⁴Matthew 20.12

And for us, it is so easy to think that the solution is one of the many things we are lacking. I am here to say that it's not money, not position, nor empire, not power, not program, not tracking software, nor electronics, nor Youtube, or Zoom or Teams or any of the other modern conveniences that we hope will make the difference. As much as they all help—as much as money and people make things go well and keep the lights on and the parish ticking over—we need to listen far more carefully to the Acts of the Apostles to know the way forward.

The Apostolic age was marked by a fearlessness and willingness to go further to see that the news of the liberating love of Jesus was available to the known world. This is the energy with which we need to be infused.

Peter and John have entered the temple by the beautiful gate and there is a man crippled from birth who looked to them for alms. The answer Peter gives him to his request is unexpected. “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have, I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ, take up your bed and walk.” The man took up his bed and walked and carried on into the temple, leaping and praising God.⁵ In the historical struggle between the pragmatists of the church and the dreamers, the pragmatists have said we need more than the name of Jesus. The dreamers in the church have assured us that what Peter said that day is true today. That the name of Jesus is more precious than any other resource...Franciscans in particular would tell us the rest is extras. We find ourselves as both dreamers and pragmatists. We have resources bequeathed to us by those who went before, but we also have the name that is above every other name.

The central message of the church is the healing, reconciling, disrupting, transforming and irresistible grace of Jesus Christ. All the other factors in our corporate life must take a back seat to this singular transforming and disrupting presence of Jesus in our midst. This is not a matter of simply wishing people “Jesus loves you” then not lifting a finger to relieve their burdens.⁶ It is not a matter of making converts to a particular vision of what Jesus taught. I am talking about inviting people in to the relationship that we already enjoy with the living Lord and discipling them not simply to be converts, but to be fellow travellers on the way. Breaking bread with us because of the hope they find in us. Standing with us because we have stood with them.

I am warning you that if we pursue this gospel, we will need to be ready for people who have been freed from sin or addiction, or shame or guilt or any other number of factors in their life—to come dancing and leaping and praising God into our midst. Are we prepared to walk with those who have been freed from the modern slavery of

⁵Acts of the Apostles 3.8

⁶James 2.16

human trafficking? Are we ready, in Jesus' name, to feed the ones who are hungry and thirsty—advocating and disrupting the dehumanizing messages that surround us, because it is what Jesus taught—what he commanded us to do? Are we prepared for that kind of disruption?

Will you welcome those who are new to God's grace who cannot stop talking about the glory and the love that has been showered on them? Some of you are probably squirming in your seat at the thought, but I am encouraging the whole diocese to recognize the joy of disruption. The unmitigated, transforming joy when the disrupting Grace of God breaks through sin, system and separation and forms and molds communities of hope.

The Archbishop of York pointed out to us in his talks at Provincial Synod of fall 2024, that this seems to be God's preferred pattern that the Holy Spirit seems to follow. A small group of people come to know the Lord Jesus and around them forms a community of hope which begins to get on with the work of transforming lives, challenging oppressive regimes and setting people free from sin and death in all its forms. It starts small and then it grows because hope is attractive—and because the Gospel is an eternal hope, it is the most attractive of all.

Central to that hope is joy. Christ brings us joy every day, at our best, even in the midst of all our troubles. I am talking about the kind of joy which empowers and strengthens people to encourage one another to grow in their faith and reaches beyond the safe walls we hide behind. Being a good, properly repressed English-Canadian Anglican, I understand the old joke about the fervent convert attending an Anglican Church and being told by the crusty old rector "you may have got the joy of the Lord, but you didn't get it here!"

But Joy in our relationship with Christ is the central engine of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. I asked our Communications Officer Mark Hauser to highlight with each weekly eNews the stories of outreach all over the diocese. I wanted you to see on a weekly basis all the things we have been doing. What I am asking us to look for are new ways to disrupt the sin, systems and separation that keep us from being effective makers of disciples; While at the same time building on the near miraculous work going on in the parishes of this diocese. Thrift shops, food banks, choral programs, Bible studies, community outreach, seniors groups, Harmony Lounge, which brings in young men and women who use music to connect one again in a church basement. The clothing of those in need—the reaching out to the most vulnerable in our midst—and in particular this being the 30th anniversary of the diocese holding sponsorship agreements with the government, our global outreach of the welcoming of Refugees into Canada through the work of DOORS. These are the ways in which we have been disrupting sin, systems and separation which have been pursuing human beings with suffering and hopelessness. I am simply noting that we must continue to do all this faithful work while we begin to retool and

reshape the diocese's focus in the next few years.

For the next two to three years, the diocese needs to think long and hard about three interlocking matters in our common life.

1. The Mission of being communities of hope
2. Formation of hopeful leaders who inspire joy
3. A transformation in the business of being church.

Communities of Hope

I am asking every community to please consider the ways in which the Holy Spirit may be calling your parish to disrupt its inner life to change things about itself, while at the same time it looks about the surrounding community and looks for those who are under served and find a way to reach out. Being a community of hope is marked by a joyful sense that it is Jesus that has commanded us to do this work and that we are filled with compassion at the prospect of loving the world as Christ did. Up to and including laying down our lives for one another.

Hopeful Leaders

Hopeful leaders are doing more than managing decline, but are looking for ways to leverage our history, our buildings and our natural place in society to impact the people around us. Catechesis (teaching about Jesus and what being a disciple means) is much more than just looking for converts or “bums in pews”. We will seek to train the next generation of leaders through faithful catechesis, traditional seminary training, new generations of online training and support at all levels of church leadership. I am grateful for the people who have offered themselves as deacons, and I want to fully expand the diaconate in this diocese consistent with the witness of the early church and the developing best practices of the diaconate across Canada. This is part and parcel of what we have already begun in parish based discernment for those who are identified for the diaconate and locally raised priests.

We need deacons and priests who are collaborative and creative but above all faithful to the vision of the extension of the transforming grace of God to those who have not heard the message in a loving way. Hopeful leaders who inspire joy will create communities by the attraction of the freedom and peace which the gospel makes apparent in each of our lives. I am asking the diocese to start the process of retooling the church for the road that is set before us. Not the road our parents or grandparents walked. We have already initiated education programs and will deepen and expand them for those in lay ministry, those called to the diaconate and those offering themselves to be priests in this diocese. These are only part of the plan.

The Business of being Church

Part of transforming the church for today's mission will be helped if we keep one central point in mind. Let us consider how we can best restore the joy of being a parish. There is a consistent message from clergy and lay leadership in the diocese that we feel under prepared and overwhelmed by the tasks which fall to parish leadership. I am asking The Diocese of Ontario to begin a two to four year process of finding ways to both lift the administrative burdens on churches, and restore the sense of joy in being a member of a parish or even taking on parish leadership. Rather than obligation, let us find ways to bear administrative burdens more broadly for parishes and co-operate more widely. None of this will be set up to rob any parish of its autonomy. Certainly I am not looking to undo the way they have done things before if they are working. But let us find options which can make administering parish life less onerous and more suffused with the Joy of the Lord which will indeed be our strength.

I have spoken at length and need to draw this to a close—I have a number of thanks to offer and some appointments to be made.

I am awarding the Diocesan Award of Merit to two persons this year: Audrey Doliszney of St. John's Portsmouth and The Venerable Bill Clarke as he retires as Archdeacon and as incumbent of St. Thomas' Reddendale.

I am naming three Canons this evening: The Revd Margaret Johnston-Jones is developing the role of Canon Pastor for the Diocese and indeed the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario is revising our safe church protocols and the changes that are needed. Margaret will be Canon Pastor in the seat of St. Margaret of Scotland.

The Revd Mike Michielin is named Canon Theologian and will continue with his ministry of research, theological writing, and in particular help to this diocese, in supporting and teaching and reflecting on formation for ministry among deacons and locally raised priests. Mike will be Canon Theologian in the seat of St. Augustine.

The Revd Lisa BrantFrancis is a model of patience, love and faithfulness. While Rod is being called to deeper and more strenuous ministry, I do not want it missed, that Lisa is in large part the reason Rod can do what he does—and I know he would agree with me. Therefore, in order to honour her and to be sure that the bishop in her new diocese fully recognizes her wisdom, patience and depth of love for the Lord, I am naming her Canon of the Chapter of St. George in the seat of St. Kateri Tekakwitha.

(As an aside, I want to say to you Rod, that you go into this episcopal ministry with our blessing, our prayers and all the good wishes we have—thanking you for your faithfulness in this diocese and all the other places you have served. We are your fellow workers and I am hoping we can deepen the partnership with the Diocese of Moosonee in days to come.)

I also want to thank the Venerable David Selzer, who having retired a couple of times before is now going to try again and see if it sticks. Thank you for your wisdom and your willingness to come alongside us and help us in this diocese. God bless you and may you have many years to enjoy the fruits of your labour.

I want to welcome The Venerable Jane Humphreys as executive archdeacon of the Diocese of Ontario and her husband, the Revd Canon Dr. Gordon Maitland. Jane preached the sermon at my very first parish induction after my curacy in 1995, and to be sure, she preached the bookend at my consecration as bishop in 2015. Jane and Gordon are very old friends and I look forward to introducing them to our life here. They are faithful servants of the Gospel and I know that as you are also faithful servants of that same Gospel, we will deepen in faith as we serve Jesus in the years to come.

Lastly, to the staff in the office. To Joyce and Laura, Mark, Wayne and Alex, and especially Wendy, I want to offer my thanks to all of you for making the life of the office lighthearted, faithful, fun and filled with laughter. I could not manage this work without the unseen hours of effort which you all put into our work and service to parishes and clergy across the diocese. It is my privilege to serve you. To the whole diocese as the XIII Bishop, I thank you all for your trust in me and your continued faith in the Lord Jesus. I am privileged to be your servant in the Gospel.