DIOCESE OF HURON CHARGE TO SYNOD 2026

THE RIGHT REVEREND DR. TODD TOWNSHEND, BISHOP OF HURON

We only meet like this once a year, usually, and some of you are here for the first time so I will begin with a recap. Here are the "short form" summaries of the Bishop's Charge over the past six years.

1. Remember who we are and what we do. (2020)

2. Live in community by yielding to the life of the Spirit (2021)

3. Expect to meet the Risen Jesus along the way (2022)

4. Be ready to sing the Lord's song in a strange new land (2023)

5. Continually turn to the God of Grace (2024)

6. Cultivate a life of faithful stewardship and generosity (2025)

This year:

7. Plunge more fully into your life in Christ.

We've spent the past year with renewed focus on God's purpose in calling us to lives of faithful stewardship and generosity. We are going to keep the strong focus on this for the next few years, and I pray, for every year to come. It's central to everything. Stewardship isn't a program to sustain the church. It's the other way around. We sustain the church so that lives of faith and generosity can be made possible.

I am very grateful to Kevin Dixon, Andra O'Neill, Jennepher Cahill, Rodger Moran, and Julie Ryan—our Diocesan Stewardship Advisory Team—who have guided us in deeper learning and commitment in offering our gifts within the church and for the world. I cannot even say that, without breaking into doxology!! "Praise God from whom all blessing flow!"

A nice surprise for me over the past year has been the re-discovery of how many powerful and beautiful stories of stewardship can be told in our life together. One of the most powerful gifts we can offer one another is the simple testimony of a life being shaped by Jesus Christ—who is THE gift and who puts within us every gift. Every gift is needed for us to be continually raised up in the world as His body, for His purposes.

The Christian faith has always been shared and transmitted not only through what we teach, but through what we have seen and heard, experienced and lived. When we tell one another where we have encountered God, how grace has changed us, or why we have chosen to give ourselves to the work of the Church, faith becomes visible, tangible, resonant.

This is especially important when we speak about stewardship. Stewardship is not primarily a church program or a conversation about money; it is discipleship expressed in the whole of life. It is our grateful response to God for everything God has given us: our time, abilities, relationships, resources, bodies, communities, and the created order itself. When we share our own stewardship stories, we help others imagine what such discipleship might look like in their lives.

A personal testimony does not need to be dramatic or polished. It needs to be truthful. And when ordinary Christians speak truthfully about the difference Christ is making in their lives, faith is passed on. We pray that God will give us courage to speak—but also that God will give us a listening heart. So often, God reaches us through our ears. Other physical and spiritual senses too, but is a Christian practice to develop a listening heart. An openness to hearing something new.

I think of Mary at the tomb of Jesus—the empty tomb. She did not find what she was looking for. But she turned from that emptiness and encountered the risen Jesus through the sound of him speaking her name. And sending her to “go tell”.

So, the work we’ve done around stewardship has helped us to move from the narrow confines of fundraising to the place where it belongs: at the heart of Christian discipleship.

And that is where this year's "twin" theme comes in, discipleship. My charge for you in the coming year is to continue to do the work of stewarding God's gifts, and now to ask, what are the gifts? It sounds like a question that shouldn't need to be asked. What are the gifts? As a person enters into Christian faith, as we renew the commitment to Christ that was made in our baptism, what gifts are given? Discipleship sounds like something we have to do. It is.

But it's impossible to do without the overflowing giving of the triune God. These are given first. They make it possible. You died with Christ in his death, you are raised with him in his resurrection. Now what?

Practice. Practice living a Christian life. Practice following, not leading, following Jesus. Put him at the centre of everything. He is already there! But bring this to mind and to heart. And gather others around this holy presence.

The treasures of Christian living are a true treasure. Maybe the only true treasure. And we recommit to exploring this, spending time on this, investing resources into this. What is it to follow Jesus? How does a person come to faith in him? I invite you and your congregations to dive more deeply into that water. To make this a year of baptismal living. Take the plunge, once again. Dive more deeply into your life in Christ and invite everyone you know to do the same.

For another way to think about this, here is a fable. "The Farmer and His Children."

A rich farmer, about to die, advises his children not to sell the land they are inheriting because "a treasure is hidden there." After the father's death, the sons so thoroughly plow the fields that there is no part of them "where they do not work the soil again and again." But they find no treasure. However, one concludes, there was indeed a treasure: the work that causes the earth to be fruitful. *(LaFontaine's Fables)*

The faithfulness and fruitfulness of living a Christian life can be compared to this treasure—the field. There is no value-object to be found in the field—there is no clump of gold in the field. The treasure is the fully cultivated, fertile field. The *whole* field is the treasure. The "treasure" of Christian life is found in the work of plowing, of turning, of "converting" to the gospel – the symbolic "field" that your Christian life is. . . that our common Christian life is.

This work has many names and many ways. One of the oldest names for it is *Catechumenate*. Like Stewardship, this is something so central that we cannot let it slip from the centre of our lives together.

A catechumenate is the formal period of instruction, spiritual formation, and preparation that a person undergoes before being baptized and admitted into the Christian Church. But for those already baptised, it can also be re-experienced through the part of the process called "*mystagogy*". Which basically is a word for "being led through the mysteries". The mysteries of Christ and a life lived *in Christ*. It's something that takes a lifetime and never really ends. Because the mysteries are inexhaustible. They are deeper and richer and more good than we will ever know. So, we want to be drawn more and more deeply into them.

This will be good for us. But it's more urgent than that. It is something the whole world needs—badly. There is a deep hunger and thirst for this; it is an acute need. We need to be ready for the people who will come to us with this hunger and thirst. Things are getting more difficult for most people in most ways. Even as some of us seem to have everything we could ever want. This work will help us to want the things that God wants. And that is liberating.

There is a treasure to be found in the work of catechumenate and it requires the regular, persistent work of turning, converting our lives to the gospel. Life in baptism, and after baptism, is not a "thing", it is a way, it is a "plunge" into the fullness of the language and culture of Christian faith so that we may live out of it.

I am asking for a simple thing. Find ways to prioritize this as a year-round activity. Establish, or increase, small group ministry in your parish. Groups of 6-12 people. Facilitated, focused on four things: gathering around the presence of Christ and learning about him, prayer, mutual support and care, and a group mission or task that will bring joy.

Canon Lisa Wang will be speaking later about some ways to enter into this in your parishes and there will be groups of people made available, as we've done with Stewardship, to help you focus on this aspect of discipleship—coming to know more deeply what it is to plunge into the joy of it all. There are lots of resources available for this work. The goal is to continually turn to grace. To find resonance in the people and world around you and to give thanks for God in everything. This will automatically give life, release joy, and propel us into the work with good news and good help.

Discipleship and Resonance.

I'd like to take a few more minutes to go just a little further into what is meant by this. What are we looking for here? One of the most interesting concepts I've come across lately (Hartmut Rosa, sociology) is captured in the two words: Acceleration and Resonance.

In our time and place, as this theory goes, social acceleration is the problem. The speeding up of "modern" capitalist society forces a continuous increase in the pace of life, the pace of technological innovation, and social change JUST to keep it all from collapsing. It requires more energy and effort just to achieve the same things. To achieve dynamic stabilization, "just to stay in the game", you must grow, speed up, innovate continually and ever faster. That's the demand on us. Life starts to feel like going up the down escalator. A lot of work just to stay still, to keep afloat.

The result: alienation.

When everything moves too fast and is treated as a resource to control or consume, the world begins to turn cold, distant, and "silent". I worry about things that go cold, distant, and silent. It's not always bad. Sometimes we need to cool off, get away, sit in silence. But this is different. It's alienation. Often the feeling of being alienated from God. Acceleration destroys our ability to truly connect. With one another, with our work, with the world around us – including the natural world—and with the divine. There is no more resonance.

Recently, I was walking along the bays at Owen Sound, within Georgian Bay (in the deanery of Saugeen!). It was late in the afternoon and the sun was shining on the water and on the opposite shore. We were on a two-day vacation and playing golf. At one point we sort of "looked up" and we all stopped to take it in. Just walking down the fairway and we stopped for a moment and took it in. It was more beautiful than "normal". It all seemed to radiate. One of us said out loud, "beautiful". Everyone agreed. Minutes later another one wondered why do we stop and look and think that "that" was beautiful?

Later that night, one of the group was outside and poked his head through the door, "Guys, you've got to come see this." It was a clear but dark night, stars visible everywhere, but just above the horizon over the water was the moonrise. That night it was a half-moon with that orange harvest moon glow. Looking larger than normal, as the moon does when close to the horizon. It was spectacular. We stood there for a while. Enjoyed it. Tried unsuccessfully to capture it in photos.

What were we looking at? What was speaking to us? When the one friend guided us out there to see the moon, the responses in us were very similar. We could have responded differently, I guess. What's so great about that? The moon is always there. It's just a rocky orb, 385,000 kms away, littered with craters and devoid of life. It's been like that for millions of years, it never changes. A big rock in the sky, what's the big deal? That is all true, but that response might have missed something—the opportunity for encounter, for enjoying the resonance of the moon, that night, in that place, with those people.

This is the same moon that every creature that's ever lived on land, or maybe even in the sea, has a relationship with. And somehow it was momentarily available to us in a new way.

"Resonance" is a sociologist's word for the solution to the problem (acceleration, the desire to control, increase, produce) and it's resulting alienation. What are our words for it? We have many. Resonance is a good one too.

Notice that the response to the problem of acceleration is resonance, not deceleration. Resonance is a two-way relationship. It is an active, responsive connection where you touch the world and the world touches, moves, changes you. It "speaks". And you hear, if you're listening.

I think of "sympathetic resonance" of vibrations caused by sound waves or other movement. It's powerful. A harmonic phenomenon where a passive object or body begins to vibrate at a certain frequency because it encounters external waves of energy on that same frequency. It's a match of natural resonant frequency. It can happen on stringed instruments, in tuning forks, and in and between human beings and the mediations of the world.

I think of string theory in physics. That the smallest building block of all life, smaller even than electron or quarks, are tiny vibrating strings of energy. That we are made up of a gazillion little vibrating string of energy. String of energy resonating deep within, relating to other strings of energy.

I heard in a sermon recently about the Canadian artist Emily Carr who travelled from the West Coast to visit Lawren Harris, one of the Group of Seven at his studio. They met for a while and then he wisely just left her with many of his paintings, some finished some unfinished. After experiencing them, she wrote in her notebook, "Oh, God, what have I seen? Where have I been? Something has spoken to the very soul of me, wonderful, mighty, not of this world. Chords way down in my being have been touched. Dumb notes have struck chords of wonderful tone. Something has called out of somewhere. Something in me is trying to answer."

(Emily Carr, Hundreds and Thousands, The Journals of Emily Carr, 6. Sermon by Rev. Dr. Hyuk Cho)

Divine resonance is in the world and it's a way to think about the connection between the divine and the human. It is not always a harmonious thing, like a beautiful chord. It can be dissonant. It may speak warning, guidance, protection. So, we are all ears. We find ways to put up our antennae and expect God to "speak". You know resonance. You may not have sensed it recently but you've all known it, at times.

With these kinds of things in mind, I think that this would be a good way to spend the next year: asking, locally, how can we cultivate Christian resonance? Within our own traditions and open to the "ever ancient, ever new" gifts provided by the Holy Spirit of God—in your daily rhythms, in your daily practice, in your parish life together, in our meetings, in our meals, in our worship, and in our outreach. Say "Amen" to what you are! Plunge more fully into your life in Christ.

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