

President's Address – Diocesan Conference 2022

How good it is to be together; gathered in person as the diocesan family, the people of God in the Diocese of Monmouth. This is how I imagined my first conference would be back in 2020. But that year, I was one of perhaps 6 people socially distanced in the Cathedral, speaking to you online. Last year, 2021, was similarly so but held here at St Teilo's, and by then we'd got quite techy and were at least able to do some work together through break out groups, discussing and developing our vision. But here we are, together at last and how different it feels.

Back in those days, we were separated, staying at home, keeping our distance. All for very good reason. Now, we're back in our church buildings, worshipping together, receiving the sacrament, sharing food and refreshment and able to sing our hearts out. It's said that we only realize what's important to us when it's no longer there. COVID, for all its horrors, suffering and death, has reminded us of what is, fundamentally, important to us: what it is to be human, what it is to share with others, what it is to be part of a community of faith. Let's not take those things for granted now that they are returned to us.

But let's not either slide back into some sort of comfort blanket, content to feel safe and secure in our old familiar ways. Because we have a job to do.

In my first conference address, back in that empty cathedral, I reflected with you on our situation after 7 months of lockdown in the light of the exile that God's people experienced in the time of Jeremiah. They'd been taken from their land, from Jerusalem, and forced to live in captivity in a foreign country, Babylon. Everything they held dear, everything that connected them with God – their land, their temple, their way of life – had been taken away from them. It was 70 years before they were able to return and what they found when they did was a wasteland. Jerusalem had been ransacked and the temple destroyed. All that they had held dear was in ruins. They had to rebuild the city and the temple. They had to reconnect with the promised land that God had given to them. And they had to re-establish themselves as a nation, and a people.

It's not quite that stark for us, but we don't have to look far to see the challenges we face as we emerge from the pandemic. If we're honest with ourselves (and honest we have to be), the challenges were there even before the pandemic. But we see them now all the more clearly.



There are three. We know them well.

The first is the declining number of people attending our acts of worship. Very few of our congregations have been growing. Even fewer are growing at a rate enough to counter the number leaving because of infirmity, illness or death. The data we've gathered over the past decade and more show a year on year decline. The limited data we have on post-pandemic church attendance – those who have come back, in other words – suggests around a 30% drop in the number of people coming to church and there's anecdotal evidence that some congregations have lost many if not all of their young families. People have got out of the habit. They've found other things to do. Or they remain nervous about being in public spaces. Add to this the age profile, which remains largely 60 year olds and above, we're faced with a sobering picture. If the trend continues and nothing changes, the prediction is that by mid 2032 – 10 years' time – Church in Wales attendance will reach zero. For some dioceses the tipping point for viability will be reached sooner.

Then there's the financial challenge. With fewer people coming to church, the giving levels are going down, steadily and consistently. It's not that congregations aren't giving. Many are giving generously, even sacrificially. But the burden is being borne by fewer and fewer people. And the costs are going up.

That inevitably has implications for maintaining our church buildings. Ancient and beautiful places of worship that have stood as a witness to the Christian faith for hundreds and hundreds of years are needing phenomenal amounts of money to keep them safe and warm and in good repair. Many are open for only a few hours a week and in many cases the congregation, through no fault of its own, lacks the capacity, energy and resources to do the work needs to be done.

All this against a backdrop of a cost of living crisis such as we've not seen for decades and which is likely to be with us for the foreseeable future. People are anxious, quite understandably, about the future and money is tight and probably going to get tighter. Added to this, we live in what's been described as a post Christian society. We might even say an anti-religious society. Wales is the most secular of all the countries that make up the UK and the vast majority of people have no time for or interest in organized religion.



And we're tired. Let's be honest. The pandemic has taken its toll on all of us and for those trying to maintain the life of the church through its worship, study and prayer online, its pastoral care to congregation members and community alike amidst all the strain of isolation, illness and bereavement, it's been tough. It's required clergy and lay ministers in particular to dig deep into their reserves of strength, resilience and stamina. Many remain weary, if not exhausted.

This is the reality of where we find ourselves.

But – and it is a big but – there's hope and joy, there's energy and even excitement, because we continue to believe that God holds out before us a hopeful future. As our headline vision statement proclaims, we have faith in our future.

And this isn't just an empty rallying cry devoid of any substance. There are good reasons to be hopeful and joyful and I want to outline three of them.

Firstly, we've been given money from the Representative Body to enable us to build and to grow. Money to the tune of £6.7m over the next 10 years, specifically for the Diocese of Monmouth. That's over and above the £137m that the RB has made available for the Church in Wales across the six dioceses. It's a gift, made partly in recognition of the lack of historic assets and resources that our diocese has lived with since its creation 100 years ago. But made also because members of the RB have confidence in our potential not just to survive but to grow. They have seen the ways in which we have recovered following the turmoil in the years following +Richard's departure. They've looked at the work we've done over the past two years to streamline and re-organise ourselves in the most challenging of circumstances. And, having listened to our plans, our vision and our strategy, they're prepared to entrust us with £6.7m.

This will enable us to retain the number of stipendiary clergy that we have at the moment and get us to a point in 10 years' time when we can pay for our clergy entirely from our ministry share – which is far from the case at the moment. £6.7m sounds a lot of money but it's not a magic wand. To get to the point we need to be at in 2032, we will need the number of people coming to our churches to grow by 160 people year on year, and there will need to be a consequent increase in giving year on year as well. It's an enormous challenge.



But the RB believe we can do it and that's an extraordinary vote of confidence in us as a diocese and in our potential.

In addition to that gift of money, we have plans. Bold and exciting plans drawn from the vision and strategy that we're launching today. I'm not going to say any more about that because Archdeacons Stella and Ian are going to be taking you through these in detail later in the conference. But I do want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all those who in any way have been involved in developing the plans that we're sharing today. The conversations, the discussions, the videos, the hard work in capturing and distilling the wisdom and the ideas and getting it all down on paper has been a wonderful example of team working at every level of our diocesan life. I hope that you will take great pride (in the right sense of that word) in what, together, we have been able to achieve.

And whilst I'm always reluctant to thank certain people in particular, I do think it's only right that we acknowledge the extraordinary work that Izzy and her small but highly motivated team have done at the Diocesan Office. Few people know the degree to which they go above and beyond the call of duty. Without them, their dedication, their care and their professionalism, we would not be where we are today.

It all bodes well for the future and it's why the RB has been able to support us in such a generous way. We are, however, still only at the beginning of a long journey ahead and the work will need to continue if we're going to translate our hopes and dreams, our plans and strategies into a changed reality on the ground, in the villages and the towns and the city of our diocese.

We need the will and the determination to grow and to believe that growth is possible. We need the humility and grace to acknowledge that we have to do different things and, in some cases, do things differently so that those who haven't yet embraced the Christian faith can hear the story of God's love for them in ways that compel them to respond. We need the faith to believe in ourselves, not because of what we of ourselves can do, but because of what God can do in and through us: because we know in our hearts that God not only believes in us but chooses to work through us, and invites us to join him in his work and in his mission to the world he created and redeemed.

And it's that word 'faith' that I want to finish with.



In all the planning and the work that lies ahead in our ministry areas and in our churches, we need above all else to ensure that we keep God at the centre of everything. If we don't, then we will fail and all our plans and strategies, however worthy, will come to nothing.

For the reason for our very being as a church is that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19); that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16). It is our faith in Christ that makes us who we are; children of God, loved and redeemed and followers of Jesus Christ. It is our faith which motivates us and gives purpose and meaning to our lives, both as individuals and as a church community. It is our faith that gives us the strength and inspiration to persevere and work for the kingdom of God on earth, even against all odds.

We are not a social club or a branch of social services. We are a church with a gospel to proclaim which is good news for every single person across the world. That is and must remain our motivation and purpose. We proclaim this good news through our worship and our prayer, through our hospitality and our welcome, through our life together as a community, and through our care and service to the world around us.

Let us then, above all else, nurture and tend our faith, not just keeping it alive but ensuring its growth and maturity, encouraging one another in the ups and downs of life so that others may see and hear and experience through us something of God's transforming love and power.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3:20,21)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Cherry', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.