

## **Diocesan Conference 2024**

### **Address by Rt Reverend Cherry Vann, Bishop of Monmouth**

This summer was a particularly interesting one for me. Not because of any holiday I took or anything unusual that happened to me. But because I registered that if I am to continue in this role until I have to retire at 70, then I'd reached in May the halfway point in my episcopate. That felt significant. It wasn't that I felt in any sense of ministry being 'downhill all the way from here' – not in the slightest. But I guess as human beings we mark these moments, and I found myself reflecting over the summer not only on how the first half had been and what, by God's grace, we have been able to do together but, more importantly, what God might be asking of me in these last four and a half years. Of course, it may be less than that – none of us know what's around the corner. But if God allows me another 4 years, (which I'm hoping God does) what is that to look like? How can I most usefully use the time that is left to me, to us together, here in the diocese of Monmouth? What are the priorities to be?

Over the past 4 years or so, we've been able to achieve a good deal.

We've successfully managed to restructure the diocese into ministry areas which is no mean feat, especially as we were living through the impact of a global pandemic. Whilst no organisational structure is perfect, the gathering together of local churches for mutual support and the sharing of resources, that are served by a team of lay and ordained ministers is, I still believe, the best way of utilizing the resources God has given us at this time.

We've developed support networks for the clergy and key lay officers, providing space for them to share their joys and their frustrations, what's going well and what remains a challenge, to exchange ideas and good news stories, and so to learn from one another. The diocesan office staff, along with the Archdeacons, have been instrumental in listening, in responding, in proactively working alongside the clergy, the officers and the MACs to support, encourage and help resource the life of God's church at local and ministry area level.

And we've secured significant chunks of external funding from the Church in Wales' Evangelism Bid Fund and the more recent Church Growth Fund to support the establishing of new projects that aim to develop new worshipping communities across the three archdeaconries and so bring new life and energy, confidence and hope to the church as a whole.

That's just the big picture. Within all that are endless stories of what has been achieved in each of your local areas. The new friendships made between churches and congregations; the things you have been able to do together, with others, that have been good, affirming and celebratory; the renewed energy and hope that many have

experienced through the faith in our future planning sessions; the ways in which additional resources and new appointments have added capacity to what is possible, in the cathedral, at the diocesan office and in many of our MAs; the work being done in the local communities and the new people coming to church; the developing work and ministries of our diocesan resource groups – for rural life, healing, wholeness and reconciliation, prayer and spirituality, deliverance ministry, the Welsh language....I could go on. But you will have your own good news stories to tell. Savour them and give thanks to God for them.

It's not all positive. The challenges remain and the work is hard. But God invites us to rejoice in the blessings he gives us and to work with him in making the most of what we have rather than forever wishing we had more.

So, what of the next 4-5 years.

As I was reflecting over the summer, the thing I found myself being most thankful to God for was not what we've managed to do but how, by God's grace, we *have* been and *are* being changed and transformed as a diocesan family; as the people of God here in this part of the Province of Wales. It feels to be a very different diocese to the one I came to in January 2020. The mood is markedly different. The tone of our conversations and the way we deal with one another has changed. In other words, we've managed together, to shift the culture of the diocese to one that is, I believe, more wholesome, more Christ-like. A culture that reflects increasingly the nature of God as we see it in Jesus Christ.

The culture of a diocese, or of any other organisation, is not easy to pin down. But basically, it's about 'how things are done around here.' It's about the accepted way of going on and is reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of the people that make up the diocese. It's set at the top, by the leaders and the senior teams and it determines how well or otherwise the vision and strategy that an organization puts in place is implemented and made effective. You may have heard the phrase, 'culture eats strategy for breakfast.' Which is a shorthand way of saying that it matters little how exciting and ambitious the vision is; and it's almost irrelevant what incentives and support structures are put in place to roll out the strategy. If the culture of the diocese plays against that, our plans and the resources we put into them will be undermined. The culture of the diocese is like its DNA; the threads of the character that run through it all. It will either support and enhance our work and ministry or it will undermine and jeopardize it. To give a very easy example – we desperately want other people to join us, we long for families and young people to become part of our church. Well, it won't matter how vibrant our worship is or how wonderful the refreshments afterwards are if the new people who come don't feel welcome, valued and wanted. How we treat the strangers that come through our doors, how we behave towards people who are not yet part of our congregations will determine a) whether they come at all and b) whether they stay. It's the 'how' of what we do that matters, almost more than 'what' we do.

When I arrived here in January 2020, the diocese had lived through a significant trauma. It was much in need of healing and reconciliation because of what had happened in relation to Bishop Richard and how all that had been handled. But it was also much in need of a change of culture. In my conversations with deanery chapters in the first few months of me being here, I heard that this was a diocese where there was a significant lack of trust between people. Where people were fearful of being open and honest and clergy knew they'd get a black mark if they tried to challenge. Where there had been favouritism and clericalism and where clergy were well aware whether they were in the 'in crowd' or not. Where promises had been broken and proper, transparent processes for appointments were not in place. Where people and congregations had felt 'done to' by the hierarchy, with decisions being made and implemented with little if any consultation.

We might wonder how that happens in a church that proclaims to be the body of Christ. But it can, and it does, all too easily. Those of you who have been following the sorry tale surrounding the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, may have heard the interview on Radio 4 last week with the Church of England bishop who has the lead on safeguarding. One of the questions to her was this: 'What is it about the culture of the church that allows someone like John Smyth to continue in his abuse for decades, even when there were people who suspected or knew very well that it was going on.'

Culture both shapes and determines our behaviours and our attitudes, at an unconscious as well as a conscious level.

So, for me, developing a culture across this diocese that reflects the nature of God as we see it in Jesus Christ is the one thing that I see as being paramount in the four years I have left with you. We have a vision, that we have developed together. We have a strategy that is being gradually rolled out in every part of our diocese. We have exciting plans, and some wonderful things are happening in every one of our MAs and in our cathedral. And we have a wellbeing guide that offers practical advice for how we can take proper care of ourselves, our clergy and lay people.

If all these things are to be sustained and replicated, if our diocese is to flourish and become what we are called to be, if our churches are to draw others to the One we proclaim, then we have to attend continuously to our culture. We have to cultivate, in an intentional way, the qualities and the values that speak powerfully of the good news of the gospel that we are called to share. And, we have to feel able to challenge when challenge is needed.

Our Culture Guide is a start. Through a period of consultation, we've come up with six values that we want to embed so that they run like DNA through the life of our church and shape our life together. These aren't exhaustive. I imagine, like me, you might think of other values that you feel are important; others that are at the top of your particular

list of 6. But these are the ones that have emerged and gained favour with those who participated in the process of discernment. And if we were able to demonstrate these qualities at every level of our life together – if, in every conversation, every encounter, every meeting, every challenging situation and all our decision making, we were able to be loving, generous, joyful, humble, courageous, honest and sincere - then I think we would see our churches, our ministry areas, our cathedral, our diocese transformed.

And this is hard work. It's the work of the heart, not the head. We're not wanting to memorise them, learn about them, put them on a poster at the back of our church buildings and look at them occasionally. We have to take these values and seek to live them out. It is no less than the work of faith and prayer and discipleship. For only God can change the heart. Only by God's grace are our lives transformed. And whilst the Spirit of God is at work in our lives whether we know it or not, as Christians we're invited to be intentional about placing ourselves in God's way, opening ourselves up to the power of God's love and allowing God to test us and shape us, mould us and fill us.

It's who we are and how we behave that will help draw people to Jesus. You'll probably have heard the saying – and I don't know who first said it – that what people will remember is not so much what you did, or what you said, but how you made them feel. In other words, the qualities that they felt and experienced through the ways in which you treated them.

Perhaps it's no co-incidence that three of our six values are listed as being fruits of the spirit in St Paul's letter to the Galatians. Love, joy and generosity are amongst those listed. To those we have added humility, courage and integrity. As we listen to those qualities being unpacked this morning and as we sit around our tables and discuss how they are demonstrated in the way we live out our faith, let's remember that these are values that will be borne out of our discipleship; a discipleship shaped by prayer and an openness to God's Holy Spirit. Let's renew our commitment to foster these qualities deep within us as we grow day by day into the likeness of Christ. Let's be intentional about developing a culture across the churches of our diocese that reflects the very nature of God as we see it in Jesus.

This will be the focus of my ministry and prayer over the next 4 years and, in this, I invite you to join me.

## **Presentation to Peter Lea**

It is my great pleasure to pay tribute to Peter's ministry amongst us as Chair of the DBF and to thank him for all that he has brought to the life of the diocese over the years.

Peter has been a member of the DBF since 2000 – representing nearly a quarter of a century's service to the church in the diocese of Monmouth. Peter served as Chair for two periods in that time; first from 2001 – 2008 and then again from 2015 to earlier this year when he stepped down for a well-earned retirement.

So, a total of 24 years' service, with 16 as Chair.

Peter has steered the diocese with a steadiness and a wisdom that has enabled it to navigate some turbulent times. His gentle, supportive and encouraging outward manner belies a steeliness inside that has enabled him to challenge when necessary and take some difficult decisions when appropriate. I remember my very first conversation with Peter was about the need for a review of the diocesan office at that time with a view to streamlining and restructuring it.

Peter is a person of prayer and deep faith. He understands what the church is here to be and to do and the need for the DBF to use the resources to support the church's life and purpose.

His care and support for the diocesan office staff has been exemplary and I know that they have written their own card to him, expressing their gratitude for all that he has been and offered to them throughout his time as Chair.

It's entirely typical of Peter that he wants no leaving gift and so, instead, we have made a donation to Ty Mawr on his behalf – a place he loves and visits regularly.

So, Peter, thank you and bless you for all that you are and all that you have done in your service to the DBF and the wider diocese. Please accept these cards and flowers as a small token of our love and appreciation.