

Diocesan Synod Presidential Address February 24th 2018

First, may I thank the cathedral staff for all the work they have done, with the diocesan office staff, to set things up and support us at the Synod this morning. It is very good to be here in the Cathedral.

I should add a word about the appointment of the new Dean. We have appointed a new Dean! We had a strong field, and the Archbishops' Appointments Office told us that we had a higher than usual number of applicants. That should be very encouraging for all of us. I am very pleased with the outcome, and enormously grateful to the Appointment Panel for their hard and careful work, and most particularly to Roger Wright, chief executive of Snape Maltings and Aldeburgh Music, for being an outstanding chair. The appointment has to now go through the usual processes and will be announced in due course.

Last week I had the privilege, and immensely heartening experience, of attending the annual High Sheriff's Awards, this year presented by Geoffrey Probert whose year as High Sheriff comes to a conclusion in April. The awards have become one of the highlights in the diary for me, after the first I attended when Judith Shallow was in that post.

You spend an evening celebrating the most remarkable contributions by volunteers and local charities from across the county to the lives and well-being of the people of Suffolk, to young and old, to those struggling with life, to those who need a helping hand, offering companionship, sport, practical care, leadership development, confidence building, and community enterprise.

Of course all this is meat and drink to Christians in every community across the county, and so I was thrilled that three of the awards this year went to church enterprises and people. The Rebuilding Broken Lives award went to the Selig Trust that runs the Ipswich Winter Night Shelter and Ipswich Hope into Action – providing beds and then homes for the homeless. The Trust was set up by Paul Daltry, and Rob Darrington, Andy Turpin, Charles Jenkin, Carol Mansell and Mervyn Dyer are on the board. The work of Selig depends of course on a great army of volunteers from the churches and community in and around Suffolk.

The High Sheriff's Special Award for Suffolk Heritage, reflecting his care for our county's heritage, went to the Suffolk Guild of Ringers set up in 1923 following the creation of the new Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich. The Guild have over 600 volunteers ringing in 107 towers across Suffolk, and are engaged in the repair and maintenance of a number of towers.

Finally, and this is really a case of "last but not least," Sally Fogden, long serving Bishop's Agriculture Chaplain, received the High Sheriff's Lifetime Achievement Award for her work with the church, with farmers, and with the disabled. Her service is exemplary and her generosity of time and energy pretty much unparalleled.

All of these live out in different ways Christ's command to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. Christian service is a hallmark of the Christian life, going back to Jesus' ministry of healing and the life of the first Christians described in the Acts of the Apostles who "would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." As the Epistle of James reminds us, faith without works is dead.

Love, generosity and self-giving is what we are about. And that is not directed inwards, but outwards. As William Temple remarked, the church is an organisation that exists for the benefit of its non-members.

Long before I came to this diocese, I have believed that a mark of a healthy church, an authentic church, is one that makes a mark for good on the community in which it is set. I wanted our Diocesan Vision to include the phrase, "flourishing congregations making a difference" because that is what we exist for, to worship God and to engage in acts of love and care in our communities that embody God's love for all.

The examples from the High Sheriff's Awards of course are just a tiny proportion of what our congregations, and the diocese as a whole, do in showing and sharing the love of Christ through practical acts of service. Bishop Mike and I see countless examples, big and small, of sacrificial service for the good of others that are themselves profound witnesses to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

We are focussing on this today, for us as a diocese, as congregations and as individual Christians.

As a Diocese we are about to debate a new environmental policy for the care of creation, and I hope I will be able to sign a commitment to us becoming an Eco Diocese, reflecting the work already going on in so many of our parishes. I want to thank and encourage the Diocesan Environmental Group and the Revd Sandie Barton, whom you shall hear from shortly, for the effectiveness of what they are doing.

Thanks to the Revd Carol Mansell, we are involved as a Diocese in the national Clewer Initiative, a remarkable programme to help our churches engage with the appalling challenge of modern slavery in our county, and to support the victims of this. Carol has taken this initiative on on our behalf and has placed materials on the display behind me, including the booklet, "Labour Exploitation: Spot the Signs".

Further afield we continue to engage in our care and support for the church in the Diocese of Kagera, while learning from and being inspired by them. We will hear more about this shortly too.

You will remember what an amazing success the Bishops' Lent Appeal for Kagera was last year. This year we are looking to home, and have asked every parish or benefice to identify a local charity or project that they would support by raising funds this Lent, making a difference in our own back yard. Mike's and my plan is we do this on alternate years, and support the church overseas through our links the years in between.

My challenge to every congregation is to engage in some activity, project, action, that embodies and reveals the love of God for all in your local community or neighbourhood. Whether you are a congregation of 60 or 6, we can all make that difference. It might be about loneliness, or dementia, or a children's group or open the book, or any number of things. But this is a crucial part of our life and witness as Christians together.

For many of us the challenge is our buildings. But these are also opportunities, blessings – sometimes heavily disguised – for community care and service. I am very grateful to the team led by Archdeacon David, including James Halsall, Sally Gaze, Dave Gardner and Charlotte Hodgson who have produced a toolkit to help churches look at possibilities for augmented community use.

I have asked the group to now spend a substantial amount of time, to report back in September 2019, on a long term plan for the sustainable future of our buildings. This is a huge task but an area where many others will want to partner, including our current High Sheriff. Several other dioceses are working on the same challenge, including Exeter who have been funded by the Archbishops' Council to undertake a project on the matter of the future of church buildings.

In terms of Growing in God, this is all about growing in influence. Our individual, local church and diocesan commitment to engaging with the needs of people near and far, is an expression of the Gospel in which we all have a part to play.

We cannot determine the fruit of growing in number or growing younger. We cannot compel people to have a faith – though we can do many simple things to make that growth possible – planting and watering – clearing the weeds and brambles – sowing seeds – not being fatalistic and believing in God’s providence. But we can determine what we do in seeking to grow in depth, attending to deepening our own faith and Christian practice, and engaging in actions that helps us to grow in influence.

It is a particular delight to welcome to speak to us in a little while, Mark Pendlington, Chair of the Lord Lieutenant’s initiative Flourish to strengthen our communities. Mark is Group Director of Anglia Water, former chair of the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership, and recently became chair of Easton and Otley College. He is here to talk with us about Flourish, and to talk about how critical our churches are to the life of our county.

By our fruits we will be known, and the church’s engagement in service with the poor and in need has always been a strong part of how the church is known in Suffolk. I am personally committed for my tenure as Bishop to do my best to ensure that increases and strengthens. I want to encourage all of us to ask what actions God is calling us to that we may show and share the love of God in our communities.

24 Feb 2018