

It seems an age since we had a Diocesan Synod, and it is – the last being a year ago. And for me it is even longer ago, since I was on sabbatical this time last year and so my last Synod was June 2019. A huge amount has happened in the meantime, which we could not have anticipated or imagined. This has been a time of global convulsion. As others have said, we are facing not one but three pandemics: the coronavirus, environmental destruction, and racism. This is a time of upheaval, and however much we may look back longingly wanting things to return to how they were, the world is never going to be the same again, and nor will we.

I want to start with a passage of Scripture – since we haven't spent time Dwelling in the Word, which was my mistake. The passage will be familiar to those who say morning prayer – it is part of last Wednesday's reading from I Kings 17:

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of

meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.”

Elijah is sent to a widow. We have been confronted in these months with grief and loss unprecedented in peace time. More than 50,000 dead in this country alone, and over 1m around the world, from coronavirus; husbands, wives, parents, children, friends and colleagues have died, and there have been nearly half a million confirmed cases, on top of which all those who have not been tested. None of us has been untouched by the suffering, or the grief.

As a diocese two of our former diocesan bishops have died, Bishop John Dennis, who died of the coronavirus a month after his wife succumbed, and just two weeks ago, Bishop Richard Lewis died after a short illness. I know you join me in offering prayers and condolences for their families.

And the losses has been on many other fronts – jobs and livelihoods, education, social interaction, sports, arts and music, and of course church worship and fellowship. While some of this is returning, everything remains constrained. And, with the widow of Zarephath, shortage of food and hunger in a time of crisis, has been an alarming experience for many people across our country, bringing into sharp relief again the deep social injustices in our society.

But what happens in the story? Elijah, the man of faith, knows that God would not have sent him to the widow of Zarephath if God was not going to provide her with the food to feed him as well as herself and her son. God does provide. And so we in our churches across Suffolk who have seen the hunger

so many people are facing, both physical and spiritual, have put our hand into the flour barrel and just when we thought we were running out, have found that there is yet more. God does provide.

And I believe with my whole being that God provides us with all we need to serve his mission here in Suffolk. We might be like the widow and say, we've only got enough for one more meal and then we pack up, but one like Elijah challenges us to trust that God will keep providing. And God does provide.

That is what we have seen. People have stepped forward and with incredible generosity, energy, compassion and creativity and reached out to help those who are hungry, those who are isolated, those who are lonely. And that outpouring of love in action is continuing and will continue through the winter months and beyond. And it is hard work, but our own inner wells are being replenished because it is God's work we are doing.

And just when we wondered what we could do with our churches shut, we discovered the internet, and online worship, and now we are reaching people who for all sorts of reasons were unable to participate before. We thought the barrel of flour was about to run empty, and low and behold there is more. And we have been sharing with one another over Zoom in ways we may not have done before. New relationships have been made, others strengthened and faith has deepened.

And now we know that online worship is here to stay, and we are working out creatively how to do both online and physical church together.

So God is blessing people's efforts, creativity, ingenuity and generosity, and I am nothing but heartened and encouraged. Through conversations and discussions during these past months two dimensions have become clear to us – this is a time for deepening faith and deepening service. Both of these are going on, all I have said so far is about that, and we thank God for that.

In a few minutes we will break into groups to discuss one of six topics that we need guidance and ideas about as we move forward. These are matters that we have been engaging with for long before the pandemic, but the issues have sharpened and accelerated and we need to adapt what we are doing.

They all fit under these two headings of deepening faith and deepening service, and they all are built on the firm foundational belief that God does provide all we need to be the church across our communities for the people of Suffolk.

The first topic looks at ministry. Last week I licensed 14 new lay ministers – Readers, children's and family workers, pioneers and evangelists, and earlier in September Mike and I ordained 34 people as deacons and priests. A priority for us as a diocese is to help one another identify people whom God is calling to some form of ministry to be exercised on behalf of the church. This is key – more ordained and lay ministers.

I remain clear that we should not reduce the number of clergy in the ways that some dioceses are proposing to do – even up to 20% reductions. I believe we need the number we have to serve the communities of our county. But that only works if they have teams of ministers with them – and that means

identifying people who might serve as a local or focal minister in many of our communities – the go-to person who looks after the life of the church in that community, or teams of local ministers working across a benefice or part of a benefice – there isn't a one-size fits all, but the bottom line is we need more people to serve in a variety of ways for us together to serve God's mission here. So the first group is to think about how we might encourage that and what it might look like.

There are two aspects to the second question, about church buildings – they are a blessing, and how can we develop them, even in this time, as beacons for mission and a sign of God's loving and sustaining presence in every community; but they are also for many communities a burden, so how do we together develop ways that relieve or share that burden – what can we do differently to help? I am hugely grateful to Archdeacon David and James Halsall for their continued and creative exploration of these vital issues, and I know they would welcome your ideas. We are facing this reality sharply too, and trends have clearly accelerated.

Deepening faith has been, dare I say, a surprising result for many in this time. While this is not the experience of all, for many it has happened as they have explored online resources, new patterns of daily prayer, zoom break out rooms where they share faith and life stories with one another – a deepening of conversation and sharing that may not have been happening before.

We are all hungry for a deeper life in Christ, a closer walk with God – what are we learning from this time that helps that, what are we finding is helping us to share our faith with others, and what would we want to ensure we do to continue on this path of deepening faith?

Another unexpected impact of the pandemic has been the realisation that actually we can control carbon emissions, we can take better care of our environment, if we choose to. We can live with less – less travel, less consumption – and seeing that, it becomes a matter of willing it for the sake of our planet's, our children's and grandchildren's future.

How as a church in Suffolk do we strengthen our response, not just as churches, but for the sake of the whole community and the world? The fifth Anglican Five Mark of Mission is “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth” – how can we strengthen our engagement to really address the environmental crisis?

I have referred to the incredible ways our congregations have dramatically increased and adapted their outreach to the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities. This is about deepening service – being outward looking and serving, loving our neighbour, participating in Jesus' ministry of healing and compassion. More will be expected of us as the Autumn turns to Winter, and beyond. But that barrel of flour will always have more in it – so in that trust, how can we develop existing and new partnerships, what opportunities do we see that we want to respond to and what help might we need, how can we be the church in action in every place that God calls us to be?

Speaking of the barrel of flour...let's talk money. The sixth group topic is to come up with additional ways to generate income – and I look forward to creative and long-term suggestions. We can't keep depending on the current system which the pandemic has shown what we already know, that it is fragile.

As you all know, this pandemic has hit our finances hard, at every level. Churches dependent on plate income have not all recovered what they did not receive for several months; halls have been closed so rental is lost; and there have been no summer fetes and other fundraising events, although I am picking up some wonderfully creative ways parishes are raising funds.

I do believe that there is more in that barrel of flour, if only we put our hand in and perhaps feel in the corners we have not reached into before. We are not a poor county, though there are severe pockets of poverty, and deprivation is clearly on the increase. And some of us as individuals or parishes have resources that we could share. So believing there is plenty in that barrel, Bishop Mike and I are about to launch a three pronged approach to addressing the projected £2M deficit.

We do so with added confidence, and huge gratitude, because the Church Commissioners have shown confidence in us by this week giving us a grant of £600,000 towards this – less than a third of what we need, but getting there. I am hugely grateful to Anna, Gavin and Gary in putting the bid together that secured this. This is a big step.

But we all have to work together to make up the £1.4m difference. Without raising this money, in a diocese with very limited reserves, the next step will be cutting clergy posts, and that will become a certainty if we do not raise this by one way or another.

Mike and I are taking the lead on this with our colleagues and will be writing to all the benefices that are managing to pay their share – and remember share is how we pay clergy stipends – writing first of all say thank you, and then to ask if you can possibly give some more. You may have a rainy-day fund – well, this is the rainy day. I know many benefices are working hard to maintain their share, and we are all collectively grateful.

We will also be writing to all those who are struggling, and we will underline the importance of closing the gap, thanking them for what they are doing and urging them to do more in this hour of need. Mike and I with our colleagues will work hard with those benefices to help them, and creativity and ingenuity is going to be vital – to generate generosity. We know this group includes a handful of “won’t pays” – I am astonished by the stories of parochial selfishness. We are in this together. You too can trust God to provide, and I pray that you will see that.

Thirdly, Mike and I are going to start a fund, appealing to individuals who may not necessarily support the church but care about its presence and its work, as well as to people who already support – to give an additional amount, a one off, or for upto three years. We’re calling it Suffolk Saints. Mike and I, as many of you have done already, upped our regular giving by early on in the lockdown, so my giving to the church in Suffolk is over £4,000 a year with Gift

Aid, and Mike and I are now going to add to what we currently give to start this fund with an additional pledge each of £1000 a year for three years. All of us must pray hard about what we can do, whether to increase our giving to our local church or to add it through this fund that will benefit across the diocese.

I believe passionately in the work of the church in our county, and believe that it is more needed now, spiritually and practically, than ever. I challenge each of you to respond. We all know how generous Suffolk people are when they believe in something – I am hugely grateful to those who gave nearly £10,000 to our quiet appeal for funds to support Kagera with the challenges wrought by the coronavirus – and the diocese of Kagera are hugely grateful – so I believe that by whatever route working together we can make up this £1.4M difference.

Whether it is money, or opportunities for mission, or energy to provide vital networks of practical care, or sustainable solutions to church buildings, or making a difference in the climate crisis, or raising up new ministers lay and ordained across the diocese, God is with us, and that barrel of meal will not be empty – because God has given us all we need to serve God’s mission across our county.

I’ve given you a lot of words, and we are about to utter a whole lot more. But there is one sort of words that is more important than any other – and those are the words we pray from our hearts for the flourishing of God’s church in Suffolk – and I beg you to pray daily for our church that we grow in trust in God’s providence and deepen our own generosity giving of ourselves and of our gifts. To help our commitment to prayer, when we write this week to all

churches we will be asking you to pray the words of a particular prayer at every service, physical or online, for a month until All Saints Day, and I invite you to pray this with me now:

Loving God,
you are always with us,
and give us all we need to be your church in Suffolk.
Help us, we pray, to give as we have received:
abundantly, generously, and joyfully,
that our worship and our service
may bear witness to your Kingdom of unfailing love.
In the name of your Son who gave himself for us,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.