**Bishop’s Address: Visitation to Church Wardens**

**(Thursday 13 June 2024)**

I served in a parish in Durham which revered the memory of a past church warden. Because he read the second lesson every Sunday morning, it was his habit to rehearse the reading in his head during the sermon if the curate was preaching. On a particular Sunday, he was so lost in his reverie of the Bible that he suddenly stood up, bowed to the altar and walked out of church. His perplexed family followed. And then the whole congregation, followed by the anxious rector wondering what had happened. The curate was left preaching to an empty church. Well, it’s my job to preach and it’s your job to listen. If you finish your job before I finish mine, please don’t leave!

The last time I gathered you all here at the Cathedral, I was only the part-time Acting Bishop. Now you’ve got all of me. My whole attention is focused on the churches, local mission partnerships and deaneries of the Diocese of Lincoln, and, of course, the communities of Greater Lincolnshire. This applies at home and when speaking up for the county in the House of Lords. I am thrilled to share with Bishops David and Nicholas in being the shepherd of a glorious flock. As St Augustine said, ‘I am for you as your bishop and I am with you as a Christian’. This evening gives me the opportunity to see more of you than I could possibly meet in a year of local visits, so I can tell you to your face that you are doing a great job, guiding and supporting clergy and lay people alike. All clergy and lay ministers are authorised by me; but you are elected by your peers to be my officers in the parishes, to be my eyes and ears in every place. It is the Heineken effect, reaching the parts I cannot easily reach. Some of you are newly-elected for the first time and many, many of you have borne the heat of the day for a number of years. Hear me when I say that I honour and appreciate all your service of the mission and ministry of the local church. Thank you, deep from the heart.

Back in February, I gathered all our incumbent clergy at Swanwick, along with the Lay Co-Leads of our deanery partnerships. I share my Cure of Souls with the clergy who are licensed to have oversight over parishes and benefices. A bishop says to the priest at every institution, ‘Receive the cure of souls, which is both yours and mine’. I share my care for every living church with them. The majority of these clergy have oversight of multiple churches and/or a variety of congregations. We are acknowledging properly now that the accurate description of their wide responsibility is to call them Oversight Ministers. But that is not the end of the matter. In our reading from Ephesians, Paul writes about the free gifts of grace bestowed by Christ on His Church, gifts which are manifested in different forms of ministry to build up the Body. We don’t just need Oversight Ministers and give them more and more to do; we need what we are calling Focal Ministers.

Over time, it is envisaged that we shall have a focal minister responsible for the care of a church community in the majority of our churches under the authority of the Oversight Minister, your incumbent or priest-in-charge. Many self-supporting and retired clergy, Readers and ALMs are already exercising such a ministry unofficially. So are many of you as church wardens. What I am proposing is a dispersed version of my sharing the cure of souls with our Oversight Ministers. They will choose individuals whom they trust to share their responsibility for worship, ministry and mission in a particular community.

The people chosen may not just be those who volunteer immediately, but will also be those who take their time, and those whom other people raise up who do not fully grasp how much they are already respected and trusted to lead. I hope that some of you will consider this as an extension of your existing ministry. This is a positive step for us towards a greater distribution of authority in our diocese, without any abdication of their legal and pastoral responsibilities by Oversight Ministers. Ephesians is very clear that the base for all gifts for ministry is the grace of humility. I look for Focal Ministers to operate the spirit of unity which is also a mark of our reading from Ephesians.

This is the next logical step within Time to Change Together. The emphasis on unity in Ephesians underlines the truth that Together is the key word here. My expectation is that Focal Ministers will support one another across their Local Mission Partnership and encourage each other and the communities in their charge in worship, mission and ministry.

It is those things – joyful worship, courageous mission and loving ministry – which are at the very heart of our life together. In Resourcing a Sustainable Church and in Time to Change Together so far, we have concentrated on getting our structures and finances in an improving shape. A friend -at least I think he is a friend – told me that I was a real piece of work – great, but still with room for considerable improvement. Having done all this hard work across the diocese about shape and structure, my question to us all is how then do we inhabit it so that we can be more effective as those, like the 70 in Luke’s Gospel, who in this generation are entrusted with the joyful task to proclaim that God’s kingdom is at hand? When I was sent to Ely as bishop it was definitely not to impress the scholars of Cambridge with my less than prodigious intellect. It was to warm up the people of God in the parishes to community mission and to high quality worship. Since I have been here as the real Bishop of Lincoln I have been using the shorthand of ‘raising the spiritual temperature’. I warn you, I shall be using this until you are saying it in your sleep.

Why did Jesus send out the 70? It was because he was already heading to Jerusalem and the Cross. He needed his disciples to be the extension of him to those towns and villages to which they were sent. They were an extension of the Incarnation of Christ. What is more, Jesus trusted these people to proclaim the gospel knowing that the environment was likely to be suspicious and tough. What they had to say was also going to be hard for some to hear, even their words of peace. They were successful in their mission not because they were wonderful but because Jesus carried them in his heart. Jesus sent out the 70 in pairs not for protection but for living the life of the gospel prophetically. Individuals could have gone and delivered a theoretical presentation of the abundant life which Jesus brings. It was only by sending a mini community of two that people could see how that abundant life could be lived. It was the relationship with Jesus and with each other which communicated the good news.

We hope to have accomplished all that we promised ourselves in the first five years of Time to Change Together by the end of next year. There will be a broad consultation about how we might move from sustainability into growth. Going forward into the ten years beyond 2025 we need to focus on that relationship with Jesus in the power of the Spirit that motivated the 70. We need to look at all the ways we can become the Whitsun Wonders of Lincoln, moving in the slipstream of the Spirit at Pentecost. We all need to learn how to go deeper into God so that we can have the widest appeal among our neighbours as ambassadors for the gospel. We remember that the 70 were sent out in the shadow of the approach of Calvary. Without knowing it explicitly, they were offering a foretaste of the New Creation made from the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because we always have before us the victory of life over death, the victory of grace and forgiveness over sin and shame, the evidence of our growing in God is the quality of our service as disciples. Over the coming years I pray that we can demonstrate this more clearly in every church family through worship and prayer and study of the Bible. I want us all to be better able to explain and describe the faith which is in us through our words and through our love.

I had a widowed aunt who enjoyed going to funerals and to be a self-invited guest at the funeral tea. I congratulated her on her piety; but she confessed that it was a safe way to meet eligible men. The 70 were sent out to make themselves guests in other people’s spaces. As churches, we tend to believe that we have to be the host all the time and expect people to come to us. Through the pandemic, however, we learned how to beam ourselves into people’s homes. The great honour of a pastoral visit before taking a funeral is to be a trusted guest in someone else’s family home and try and offer consolation and hope. Whichever church type you are, we cannot just rely on being there anymore. Our churches are sacraments in stone declaring God’s presence and hospitality. They are also our launch pads into the community. When the Israelites went into exile in Babylon, the glory of the Lord travelled with them. Whenever I ring a doorbell I say a prayer of thanksgiving that Christ is there ahead of me. Think about the opportunities of being a willing guest, interested to listen to the voices of people, to the cries of the poor, and not to be looking for a quick getaway. Being a guest will change us and help us to reach out to generations which the Church has lost. We’ve already got lots of eligible older men to draw people like my aunt. It’s the multiplication of the number of disciples of all ages that concerns me. This raises the real challenge to embrace a pioneering spirit across the board. Our future is both urban and rural, but not always the same as before.

Those of you who attended my enthronement will have seen my preparation with children from a number of our church schools at St Peter’s in Eastgate. I was a very colourful Lollipop person stopping traffic for the children to cross the road safely. All of this signified my passionate commitment to the work of our church schools across the Diocese of Lincoln. They represent the brilliant distillation of our service of the common good across Greater Lincolnshire. *Growing Faith* is the national initiative which we have adopted in Lincoln This is about forging much closer links between churches, schools and households, where we acknowledge children as disciples in their own right and schools as sometimes lively all-age Christian communities which have things to teach churches how to reach out better. I have tasked Bishop David to explore the idea of online youth hub churches which is being trialled in other largely rural dioceses like ours.

I am very blessed by all my colleagues in Edward King House who are all poised to help you do your job, be that the College of St Hugh about resources for formation and training, or buildings support or guidance from the DAC. We are working hard to establish a Diocese of Lincoln charity which will support churches with few resources face the challenge of minor repairs and insurance levels. We are rolling out a programme of support for our incumbent clergy with garden management which is unique in the country and part of our ‘Lincoln Offer’ to encourage others to come and join us in this wonderful Diocese of Lincoln. I have settled very well into my Lincolnshire home. I am keen to be an adopted Lincolnshire yellow belly. One possible origin of the term is the yellow waistcoats worn by officers of the Lincolnshire Regiment so that they could easily be seen by their troops. Well, I can assure you that you will definitely see me coming in the months and years to come.

Thank you again for all that you are and do.

God bless you.

Amen.