

Bishop Stephen's Presidential Address,

Diocesan Synod, 24th October 2015

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Those of you who attended the launch of the Ely 2025 Strategy in the Cathedral on 27th September will know that the service was wonderfully subverted by children and young people. Children from our schools and parishes played such a rich part in the consultation through the good offices of Debbie Hill that I wanted to include them as much as possible. I went to speak to them at the beginning of my sermon and retold some of their recommendations - such as nurturing people by loving Jesus and re-imagining our buildings by installing under-floor heating for the people who always end up sitting on the floor. Later in the service, children from Ely messy church groups brought the Strategy document to be placed on the altar as an offering to God. A three-year-old called Henry offered the Strategy to God. Of course, the children did not want to stand where I asked them, so I said through the microphone that I should get out of the way, then. I was told later that this may have been my most important remark of the day. At the end of the service I was billed to commission the whole Diocese from the West End of the Cathedral. By a God-given misreading of an instruction, the Diocese was actually commissioned by a young lay woman.

The whole experience was a reminder that all attempts at structure and process are subject to the intention and power of the Holy Spirit. I keep emphasising that our Strategy is a framework, not a straitjacket. It is there to give us purpose and

help to grow our confidence. It is the way to scale and shape our godly ambition in mission and ministry. People tease me because of my love of outcomes. I do believe that the Strategy will help us to measure our progress across all areas of our endeavour. Growth in the number of disciples moving out of our churches as joyful witnesses is an outcome I long for. The true purpose expressed in the Strategy, however, is the transformation of the world and of every community, family and person in Christ. I pray for our all being stamped with the true character of Jesus.

As the strategy document reminds us, we do not have to create our own identity or overcome an identity crisis: God has established us as the people of Jesus. The most important words in our vision are 'Jesus Christ' and the word, 'we'. We belong to Christ and to one another, and nothing can take that away. Everything concerns 'us', rather than 'you' or 'them'. Our imperatives to engage, grow and deepen are indicators of that transformation which is happening in our midst, so that we can say with both conviction and evidence that the kingdom of God is very near. Shaping a strategy is not about putting up fences and patrolling them, but about sinking wells around which life gathers and flourishes. That is why 'we pray to be' generous and visible servants of the One who is the head of all. Everything is possible because God is Lord of all and sent his Son to die for us that we might live through him. The strategy is permission, not prison. It is intended to give us space and a timetable out of an understanding that God created time and space to be filled by the full wonder of creation. There are no limits to God's creative and redeeming love and no limits on what God can and will do with us and for us. In the light of this generosity, we are releasing the resources for an Ely 2025 strategic mission fund with £350,000 in it which will support new endeavours in mission and evangelism which the Synod endorses.

The resource that God seeks to use fully is us. We are faced with the profound and costly spiritual challenge to all of us to respond afresh to God's earnest call upon us as members together in the Body of Christ. At the beginning of the strategy document we are reminded of the encounter with the Risen Jesus of Simon Peter and the other disciples on the beach in John 21. The disciples faced a choice to remain with the familiar or join anew in the adventure of faith. The invitation of Jesus is stark: do you love me and will you follow me even to the point of death? This strategy is a tool to help us avoid cheap grace and easy answers.

The five levers of change detailed in the strategy are there to help us take more risks and move with greater confidence and energy. We definitely need the opportunity to re-imagine our buildings and to target support where there is the greatest need and the greatest opportunity. This is very important for our stewardship and mutual care. Most of all, however, my prayer is that the levers focus our minds on bringing people to Christ and our being formed together in his character for the roles of service and leadership, whatever our age or background. I am delighted to have commissioned three colleagues who have recently come into post. Ed Olsworth-Peter's appointment as Fresh Expression of Church and Young Adults Adviser particularly signals that we need to be equipped to work for a blended economy of traditional parish, fresh expressions and inventive mission within new communities as our population continues to grow. As the Church of England, we have a special calling to serve the common good in every community of our region in partnership with sister churches, other faith communities and all people of good will. Sarah Gower, following Professor Thompson before, will be working tirelessly on our behalf as Ecumenical Officer to ensure that there is a properly lived discipline of doing together whatever we can with our sister churches in mission, evangelism and engaging service. This will feature highly in relation to new communities and new

schools. There is real good will in the wider community covered by the Diocese and we can trust that the initiative to make a difference does not always have to come from us. We can be guests as well as hosts and join in wherever we see God at work. I am thrilled to have commissioned our new Director of Education, Andrew Read. I am convinced that the most distilled way in which we engage in serving the common good is through having the best possible family of schools, in our Diocesan Multi-Academy Trust, in school-sponsored academy trusts and in continuing relationship with local education authorities.

I have already touched on our being stamped with the character of Jesus Christ. This is at the heart of the Church of England's historic and current engagement with the education of our children and young people. Our concept of education is generously conceived: we want high quality delivery of education for every child, and an even higher purpose is to undertake the development of the spiritual and moral mainspring in children's lives. In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens parodies a mechanistic view of education which is just about the pouring of facts into children's heads. This leaves young people unprepared for life. Seeding and growing character and virtue is a high calling for parents, teachers and for any faith community. Not long after Dickens was writing, Cardinal Manning described character "as that intellectual and moral texture into which all our life long we have been weaving up the inward life that is in us." Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times* mistakenly wanted to turn out teachers and pupils like so many identical piano legs. We know, however, that the imprint of character is unique in every person as integral to their unique creation by God.

A Christian understanding of the development of virtue and character is that it is nothing less than a continuing encounter with the divine which widens our sympathies, raises our hopes, deepens our spirituality and draws us into community.

Of course, Christianity has embraced the classical virtues but then takes them further to be understood as gifts or fruits of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5.22-23). The gifts and fruits of the Spirit are individually bestowed and by definition, can only emerge in relationship: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, forbearance. They are not learned easily. Love grows out of being loved, but also out of finding out how to love the unlovable. Joy has nothing to measure itself against if it does not know anything about grief and anguish. True peace is won through mature and generous transformation of conflict and dissent. Patience is real when it understands the slowness and dithering of the less able: it is not tight self-control with gritted teeth. Gentleness and forbearance come when we learn to look at others and see that their fragility or hostility will not change until they trust us enough not to expect insensitivity and aggression. In learning how to respond to others, we learn how to handle ourselves, and grow into the sort of people our gifts equip us to be.

I am deliberately using the language of virtues, rather than the language of values because values can so easily be detached from context and community and, paradoxically become valueless: character and virtue are rooted for Christians in the person of Jesus Christ. In the power of the Holy Spirit, it is his character with which we pray to be imbued. The development of character is inseparable from beliefs and daily practices: people expect a bishop to exercise wise judgement after the pattern of Jesus. Dressed like this, people are also properly interested to see what I put in my supermarket trolley.

I have already made the point that education fails when it is mechanistic and reductionist. Telling stories that draw people into the narrative widens the breadth of discourse and experience. There is nothing to be gained from stunting people, only by growing them. What we look for is a holistic vision of education which evokes in children and their teachers the desire to be formed with spiritual, social,

emotional and moral intelligence as well as the cognitive. At a school I have come across nationally, there is a clear working understanding of "imperfect people in a climate of hope". The ambition is to prepare students for 'life in all its fullness' which is the promise of Christ in John 10.10. The proper emphasis on literacy in the classroom is exponentially expanded by character education to apply to our living life to the full. Ian McGilchrist has written a fascinating book entitled, *The Master and His Emissary*. He explores the false dichotomy of the left and right brain and sees this as a metaphor for the ready division in our thinking and culture between planning and measuring things over against writing poetry and using our imagination. We need to unite both sides of the brain so that a balanced and creative society can flourish. We want a country which is full of effective workers who are also empathetic neighbours, people of good judgement and wise decision-making. We want citizens whose imaginative hinterland is matched by the energy and confidence with which to embrace change and growth. We have seen an example of this starting young among the children at Shouldham School and elsewhere who took the initiative to raise money themselves for school buildings and facilities for fellow pupils in schools in our sister Diocese of Vellore, which Alfie has come to embody for us.

God sees through all of our attempts to close things down and God leaps out of our stratagems to shut the divine in a box. The language of British Values based on fear rather than hope will get us nowhere. We need an expanded and expansive vision which does not restrict our hard-won freedoms but which invites us to be committed fellow citizens of developed character and loving purpose. As a Christian, I desire that we might live the wisdom of St Irenaeus of Lyon that 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive'. Just think what transformation would be wrought in Britain and across the world if people were fully alive to every possibility of love and justice. It is precisely the warm fire of our confidence in Christ

that that makes us generous and welcoming to others because we have cast out fear. Wisdom in Proverbs 3 moves from creation to give us our confidence and security and takes us into a new ethic of engagement with our neighbours. We open up a space in which all who pursue what is good are honoured and are invited to move from sojourner to sibling. This is so much richer and universal than so-called British Values. Our goal is not people who can sign up to lists but people who, in the words of Martin Luther King, will be judged "not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character". We want to see adults and children who give themselves away fully aware of the precious gift they are sharing.

All of this is rooted in discipleship. We have uncovered a thirst for lay development and training through the consultation around the Strategy. This gels with national dreams and plans further to release all disciples to exercise the authority of their baptism to be active and effective witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are also being invited to invest in additional and more pro-active vocations work to stimulate at least 50% more ordinands a year by 2020 to offset but not to overcome the shortage of clergy in the next generation. As I have told you many times before, there will be no shortage of candidates for ordination if we enable all of us and many new people to develop as disciples of Christ. We need to be a people growing in virtue, in the character of Jesus, who want to use the framework of the Strategy to grow the Church into the future that God has planned. I was talking to a person from one of our rural parishes at a deanery confirmation on Sunday who is responsible for discipleship development. I was much encouraged by his saying that God is revealing blessing all the time and it is time to respond in bold ways.