

Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod – 7th June 2025

On Friday the great biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann died aged 92. In a lifetime of dedicated witness to the Gospel and social justice, he offered extraordinary wisdom and insight. As I reflected on his legacy, one quote stood out:

“The power of the future lies not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity but of those who trust God’s abundance.”

It would be wrong to think that the opposite of scarcity is abundance or indeed that the opposite of abundance is scarcity. As an aside, I did I must confess temporarily have those opposites in mind in the seconds following an incident last week in Norway when a seagull literally stole my cinnamon bun. But that’s another story albeit a very relatable one to our coastal parishes where seagull fish and chip heists are a constant concern. Back to my point.

The pairing of scarcity with abundance is much deeper than a simple binary. If I may, I want to connect the word abundance briefly with the word growth. Growth is not a destination. Growth is in the here and now. It’s the change that happens along the way. There is a danger that we instrumentalise growth and make it an ultimate goal that is always unattainable. This saps energy and confidence. In the same way we mustn’t instrumentalise unity. Unity isn’t the goal, it’s what happens when we commit to the journey. Now here I need to credit two people: firstly, our Director of Mission and Ministry, Ric Whaite who reflected to me that God’s abundance isn’t the opposite of human scarcity (as if the other side of the same coin) but is a complete reorientation of ourselves around God’s life and love. Secondly, the Presiding Bishop of the Norwegian Lutheran Church Olav Tveit, who gave a profound reflection on the theme of unity at the service on the Island of Grip where our friendship partnership agreement with the Diocese of Møre was signed. A journey of transformation and change is precisely what Seeking, Sharing, Sending are all about. Words and actions to enliven a vision for our Diocese to be communities of faith growing younger and more diverse, turning outwards in mission: loving God, loving one another and loving our communities. We do this by our seeking, sharing and sending. These three attributes will, I pray help us lay a foundation for growth, but this is actually a growth that is happening right now whether we see it or not. Maybe we feel it, maybe it’s just a glimpse. But it is there. Our worship equips us to go out and renew the face of the earth, proclaiming afresh the good news of what God has done in Christ to this generation. The Norwegian Church describes this vision-led encounter as one of being ‘more heaven on earth’ and I rather like that for its relatability. Bishop Ingeborg pointed out to me that both our dioceses include a close relationship with the ocean. If you stand on the shore and look out to sea there is a point where sky and ocean meet and there is no barrier. More heaven on earth. We are living it in the here and now.

Walter Brueggemann's attractiveness and relatability lie in his capacity to have enabled the light of the Gospel to travel well across many contexts to nurture communities of generous hope and genuine joy in Jesus.

Travel, light and generosity are three words that have been front and centre for me in May. I've already alluded to this in my brief mentions of Norway. For May has been a month of travel: with visits to both our Link dioceses of Botswana and Møre in Norway.

During this time, I have shared in morning prayer in a Norwegian train chapel, followed by ascending a mountain on a gondola in the week we celebrated the Ascension. I've seen zebras (which I refer to as Geordie horses on account of their black and white stripes) and tried Norwegian brown cheese ice cream (unexpectedly delicious). I've heard profound stories of hope and courage, witnessed the bravery and joy of the first women to be ordained deacon in the Diocese of Botswana. Listened to the most powerful articulation of lay vocation from a volunteer in a church in Ålesund in Norway who works as a doctor dealing with cancer patients. She finds joy and fulfilment in walking with people in the most challenging of circumstances and draws strength from her faith in doing this while also volunteering in her church. I've listened to clergy making the most of the limited resources they have without complaint. I've watched with admiration the versatility of a priest in the Møre diocese who is an Area Dean, who captains a ferry, rings the church bells and plays the organ for services and does all of this with joy and energy. I've managed to get a full Cathedral in Gaborone to declare the greeting 'Alreet pet'! Geordie-Botswana liturgy! I've listened also to articulation of shared challenges of many things from deployment of clergy to resourcing and rurality. I've stayed in an Eco Camp on the Norwegian island of Smøla and met the lady who runs it who is passionate about the environment and making a huge difference to her island community.

I've heard the powerful testimony of a member of the Norwegian indigenous South Sami community and the challenges of navigating culture and identity in relationship to a Church that has been complicit in its suppression. Here I found a fresh connection with my time as a bishop in Aotearoa New Zealand, and I was reminded of the deep challenges that indigenous peoples continue to face across our world. And I've spent time with two dear bishops, Methla and Ingeborg whose life and witness to God is both inspiring and courageous. I've shared something of our life as a diocese at the moment with them too, and I hope this has encouraged them in their work as bishops. Bishop Methla will be with us at the end of this month attending our ordination services. During his visit we will sign a renewed partnership agreement between our dioceses.

The value of our links is that through them we see ourselves in a new light and with renewed perspective. We are reminded that we are not islands, we are embedded communities of faith whose life history and love of God are interwoven. Over the past year a lot of our resource focus has been on implementing the recommendations of our safeguarding audit. While this has been in one sense unexpected in its level of demand, it has been absolutely vital. While this work continues, our focus needs now to turn to the Governance review that I first mentioned in 2023. Getting our Governance in a place that enables us to be more effective in mission is connected with the time-limited current work of our Bishop's groups for income generation and innovation, for reimagining ministry, and for ensuring the generous Legacy left to this Diocese by Bishop Alec is sustainable and missional.

Taken together all these things will help us lay foundations for a renewed bid to the National Church for resourcing to enable our vision to become a lived reality in confidence and joy. We need a solid foundation and that is what we are working on at the moment. It's not a quick fix, it will require patience.

Alongside this work is our vocations reset, which Bishop Mark is leading on. The reality is that nationally there are fewer clergy at this time: increased retirements coupled with fewer clergy to fill roles. That is the reality. Uplifting lay vocation is not about gap filling it is about a recognition that our lives are rooted in our baptism in Christ. Vocation is the willing of God to flourish in our being made in God's likeness. It wasn't for nothing that the apostle Paul spoke about different gifts, different ministries. Paul didn't however as is frequently misquoted speak about fruits of the Spirit. He spoke of fruit of the Spirit. A collective. That matters. It also means that as a collective of people we will not always agree on matters of importance or on things that may seem quite small in significance. The vocational push and pull is how we navigate this well without losing integrity or indeed speaking truth to power when needed. This collective vocation is indeed seen in the life of our Diocesan Links and is of course affirmed in the celebration of Pentecost which we will observe tomorrow. Pentecost is not so much discovery of self as discovery of others and what is held in common: an understanding which takes us out of ourselves.

Into all of this is placed the work we attend to today and particularly the conversations we are to have on the *Living in Love and Faith* proposals. This is work that the National Church is asking all the dioceses to do. It is an invitation to engage in a conversation and it's up to us how we do that. Personally, I think the phrase 'disagreeing well' is one of the most over-used and least understood phrases in Christendom. The fact is that any conversation we have is rooted in relationship. I can think of many conversations I have had and now have with people and how

different they are once a face-to-face relationship has been established. To my earlier point about growth being a journey rather than a statistical outcome I want to add the importance of a valuing of diversity *and* a recognition that this requires attentive and careful navigation.

Tomorrow as I have already said is Pentecost, it is also United Nations World Ocean Day. When we were in Norway I heard the story of a lady who lived on an island but was unable to get to church in time on a Sunday due to the ferry timetables. She could hear the church bells ringing but was sad not to be able to visit the church in person. There is now a bridge, and she is able to travel and this has filled her with joy.

I ask each of us to think about what fills our hearts with joy today, even if that joy is tempered by challenge. That's ok. God goes before us in all our journeys and in that spirit of generous hope I commend the work of this Synod as we meet today.