

### Presidential Address June 2025

We meet tonight in turbulent times. The weather is hot, and the fields are brown and dry in many parts of the dioceses. Not easy for farmers or for city dwellers. We've always had heatwaves, and flooding too, but such events are becoming so much more common for us, as they are to a much greater extent in less temperate lands already. Climate change is already with us and is set to get much worse. How will we respond? Do we ignore it, and just try to get as much for ourselves as we can while we can? Or do we do what we know to be right, and just, and seek to make a difference wherever we can?

President Trump thrives on angry headlines, and unpredictable shows of his own personal power. In the United States we hear of masked men kidnapping people off the streets in the name of the government. Are they officials? Or just vigilantes? How can anyone tell the difference? It is just one part of living in Trump's America that could not have been imagined just a few years ago. And in international relations, the rules based order of the last seventy years is being lost. Conflicts are bringing untold suffering in the Middle East, Ukraine, South Sudan and many other actual and possible places of conflict. Cyber Security becomes ever more important. Imagine if the two month outage at Marks and Spencer had affected our health system, or electricity or banking system instead?

We face many dangers, and need to pray for our government, for wisdom in leadership, and for all who work to keep us safe.

As a Diocese we are committed to climate justice, and to racial justice. Our Racial Justice Forum really appreciated the time and attention that Synod members brought to the draft Racial Justice Charter and have incorporated all the helpful comments and suggestions. I look forward to the ratification of the Charter tonight.

We will also be receiving the Annual Report and Accounts. I want to commend the work of Wadham Downing, the Chair of our Board of Finance, Andy Todd as Diocesan Secretary, and Sarah Powell our Director of Finance and their colleagues who manage our finances with such energy, vision and skill. It has been discussed at length and agreed at Bishop's Council where we were particularly struck by the clarity of presentation. The Diocese is a charity of charities, a church of many churches and financial reporting is inevitably complex. We are blessed to have such a capable team leading us through often challenging times.

Our other main item this evening concerns Living in Love and Faith. We will be responding to a request from the Programme Board for feedback on their draft proposals. Many dioceses have already done this, and it gives the Board a chance to hear from many more voices than normal, not just from bishops and members of general synod.

We already have the Prayers of Love and Faith, commended for use by the House of Bishops. Clergy are free to use them, if they wish to, with any couple wanting to offer their commitment to one another to God and to ask for God's blessing. They are of course free not to use them if they feel it is not pastorally or theologically appropriate to do so. The Prayers of Love and Faith are a resource booklet of prayers that can be used in private, or in community settings, or within an existing church service. Currently the Prayers of Love and Faith cannot be used as a standalone service, until guidelines have been approved. And so the programme board is asking every diocese to give feedback on these.

It's important to say that we are not here tonight to go over the rights and wrongs of same-sex marriage, or our own understanding of transgender issues, or any other elements of the Living in Love and Faith or LLF programme which has been explored well in this Synod already. Tonight we are simply being asked to respond to some particular questions around the proposed guidelines, that Sam will lead us through. Feedback is sent automatically to the central programme board to inform their work.

It's fair to say that there is a fear among many bishops that delegated episcopal ministry is a slippery slope. They fear that allowing clergy and parishes to effectively choose another bishop to minister to them, if they don't like the views of their own bishop, will further fracture the precious unity of the Church of England. What about other matters that might come up in the future? Where would it end?

The proposals try to overcome that by saying that such a request, for DEM or Delegated Episcopal Ministry, cannot be based solely on what they think a bishop thinks, but can only be based on statements and actions. Actions are one thing, but statements seems a very broad category. It suggests that a bishop can think something but would not be allowed to say what they think, even if they are being asked to contribute to a debate on that matter. Bishops were concerned about this on all sides of this debate.

But what do you think? The programme board quite rightly wants to hear from you! That's what tonight's item on LLF is all about.

In all our conversations I hope we can show the love described in 1 Corinthians 13. The love that patient and kind, not arrogant, rude, or quick to take offence. In a world of violent disagreement, division and polarisation, can we as church show courtesy, good listening and mutual respect for one another? I know we can, as we continue to work and pray and live for peace and unity in our fragile world.