

# Presidential address

## 9 March 2024

### Transcript

It's really important to begin this Synod by listening carefully to their [children and young people's] voices and also bringing into our own minds, the dialogues we will all have had with children and young people about the life of the church and the life of faith, following Jesus. I think those children and young people are appealing to us, as I think God is appealing to us, to pause and reflect and to seek to rebuild our ministry to children, young people and families at this particular junction.

We think over half a million children and young people live in the Diocese of Oxford – that's between a fifth and a quarter of our population of 2.4 million people are under 20. So I think we face an immense challenge in connecting with them, but we have immense resources at our disposal.

The Church of England is present in every single community in our Diocese without exception both in our parish churches and the individual lives of our congregations, in our chaplaincies and in our schools. We have an immense resource in our ministers both ordained and lay, stipendiary and volunteer. Our schools offer an excellent education to around 60,000 children and young people every single day – and to 20,000 more through our diocesan MATs and other MATs we connect with.

There's also an extensive network of public schools, often with a Christian foundation. I confirmed 51 young people in one such school, just last Sunday. We have to our knowledge, over 90 currently employed part-time or full-time children's and youth leaders across the diocese working in and for our churches and we think probably more than a thousand volunteers who dedicate a significant amount of their time to children's and youth ministry. Just try and imagine 1000 people gathered in one place, giving their time voluntarily to children's and youth ministry.

Those paid children and youth ministers alone represent an annual investment by local churches of over £1 million per annum in this ministry. We know there are around 200 church run parent and toddler groups across our diocese, offering love and welcome and support week in and week out. And we now have over 20 new diocesan chaplains working in schools and FE colleges. Every single one of them has come about because of the initiative and creativity and vision of this Synod and our Board of Education. We have now trained over 300 volunteers and staff in more than 150 schools and churches to use Space Makers, our home-grown resource to teach contemplative prayer practices to every age group.

So, imagine the difference the church across the diocese is making to the lives of so many. Ann my wife, probably like many people here, has been a volunteer for over six years now in Kidilinks in Kidlington. Every week Ann comes home and describes to me the contact with scores of families, building community, countering isolation, offering love and care to young families on behalf of the local church. Children are learning the Christian story and are being introduced to Christian faith through large and small children's projects. Forest churches, messy churches, mossy churches are beginning to flourish again after the lockdowns. And every week across the diocese, clergy and lay volunteers take assemblies in local schools, church and non-church schools; local churches host services; children's lives are being rebuilt through the patient listening of chaplains.

So much is happening and yet, and yet, we know there is so much more that we can do. There is a particular moment in the Gospel of Matthew which will be familiar to you. Matthew follows the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6 and 7 with two chapters of stories about the wonderful things

that Jesus does in Galilee: the healing of a leper; the stilling of the storm; the calling of disciples; the opening of eyes that are blind. And then we read this right at the end of Matthew 9:

“Then Jesus went out about all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest”.

Matthew is setting the scene for his second collection of Jesus’ teaching in chapter 10, which will be focussed on the ministry and mission of the 12 disciples. And I’d ask you to notice how the three themes of our diocesan vision are deeply present in the passage.

Jesus begins with the practice of contemplation. The Lord has been watching and listening all through his journeys across Galilee. He sees the crowds that they are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. The words could have been written for children, young people and families today. They mean literally according to one commentator “mangled” and “cast down”. They call to mind, perhaps, a single young mum without the means to feed her family; a primary aged child drawn into a cycle of violence; a teenage girl drawn into self-harm by social media; a young adult who is lost without purpose and meaning and love.

Jesus begins with contemplation and contemplation leads to compassion. Jesus is deeply moved in his emotions, it’s a strong word, in his guts. His strategy is not based on dispassionate analysis but on an outpouring of love. Jesus cares for the outcast, the lonely, the stranger, the one who is wandering aimlessly through life; the alienated.

Compassion in turn leads to courage. Jesus commends intercession: ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers to his harvest field. We are to approach the throne of grace with boldness, we read in Hebrews; to dare to invite God to act and to do something. But Jesus also takes courageous action, and that’s why these verses have to be set in their wider context. At the beginning of chapter 10 he summons the 12 disciples and gives them authority over unclean spirits and he sends them to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus is handing on and multiplying his own mission as the disciples in turn will hand this mission on to others. The disciples too will need to be contemplative, compassionate and courageous. Several times in Matthew 10 they are told not to be afraid; they are warned of the perils before them.

My purpose this morning is to invite every single church in this diocese, every deanery and every member of the Synod into this same cycle of contemplation; compassion and courage in relation to our ministry together with children, young people and families.

We need to face the reality that although we are engaging with tens of thousands of families through our schools, our engagement with children and young people through our parish churches is no longer as confident and strong.

You will have seen some of the statistics in the paper prepared for this Synod, which we will debate this afternoon. Based on the 2022 Statistics for Mission and the Average Weekly Attendance (AWA), 42% of churches have fewer than 5 children aged under 16, 10.7% are working with five-10 children, 8.7% between 10-20 and only 6.6% have a ministry with over 20 children and young people. In some of our urban deaneries we are now engaging through our churches with only 0.3% of children and young people in our communities overall.

We have seen a long, slow regathering of our adult congregations post lockdown, thanks to the prayers and hard work of so many people for which thanks be to God and that is still continuing. But we know across the diocese that the regathering and restoring of our work with children and young people, let alone its growth, has been much slower.

Yet we also know that the effects of lockdown on children and young people themselves have been extremely serious, still emerging. Patterns of church and youth group attendance were broken over the two years when people were not able to meet together. There has been a significant downwards shift in the number of volunteer youth and children's ministers. Families have adopted different Sunday patterns. There are a whole host of reasons we can point to. This slower regrowth, where though there were exceptions, seems to apply across every social setting in our diocese and across every tradition and size of church.

These figures should not lead us to despair. They're part of a wider picture. But they should be a spur to reset our youth and children's work with urgency, as a vital part of our service to our communities and of sharing in God's mission to God's world. We want children and young people to come to know Jesus and love Jesus and follow Jesus. We want to make disciples in every generation. We want to bless families and young adults and see them access the immense treasure of the gospel. It is also vital to underline in the context of all of this that we want of course to keep our children and young people safe in our churches and we want to continue to build a positive safeguarding culture within our parishes and chaplaincies and schools. I believe we have made good progress in this over recent years, but we should not allow ourselves to become complacent. It is essential to say clearly and often that safeguarding needs to be at the very heart of this reset, where our priority is the care and safety of children and the vulnerable.

How will that reset begin to happen? We need to do what Jesus does in Matthew 9. The first step is to look and to listen to the voices of children and young people in our communities. Where are they? What is happening in their lives? How can we serve them? What issues are they facing? What are we already doing to build connections with them through home, school and church? That wonderful triangle of influence. What are the challenges faced by families with preschool children, by primary and secondary aged children and by young adults? What are we doing already in different places which is working and bearing fruit?

This careful listening, this contemplation before God then needs to translate into compassion which flows from that genuine listening. That deep compassion, being moved in our guts as Jesus is, is the only motivation. This is not about saving or extending the life of the local church for its own sake. This is about blessing children and young people in our communities in the name of Jesus Christ. This is not simply about seeing children attend church – it is about encouraging discipleship at every stage of life and about understanding the different stages of a child's journey of faith to mature adult discipleship.

This compassion needs then in turn, to be the wellspring for courageous action in every parish and every benefice and every deanery. That is why later in this Synod we will debate this motion:

*'That this Synod endorses the need to significantly increase our engagement with children, young people, families and schools building on Disciples Together and calls on every deanery and benefice in 2024 to develop plans and partnerships for growth'.*

That is why we are asking every parish and deanery to give greater priority to this ministry, to pray and plan next steps, to prepare and identify volunteers. We are asking parishes within deaneries to

work together in new ways: very few parish churches can reach across every age group from newborns to young adults. But together we can reach everyone. And that is why we are seeking to set aside more resources for this ministry through our development fund and why we are seeking a major injection of funding from national resources to develop and enable a step change in this ministry.

Now I've been a bishop long enough to know that bishops need to be sparing in directives and appeals of this kind. All too easily they can produce guilt and weariness rather than fresh energy and initiative.

However, it does seem to me that this is a rare moment to make an exception to that policy. Our discipleship enablers have done a huge amount of listening over the last year to children and young people and those who work with them; to parishes and to deaneries. And we know from that listening, that there is already huge energy around this agenda and we know from every parish profile which is constructed across the diocese in vacancies, we know that churches are already seeking and committing resources and we are confident that people know and understand that this will mean many different things in many different places. That every piece of action has to be contextually related.

There is no standard template but there is lots of good practice around from which all of us can learn. Of course, there may be good reasons why parish X or deanery Y cannot follow a particular timetable set down and of course there is understanding for that.

But I make absolutely no apology for reaching out to the whole diocese today, to say that we do need together to make this step change at this time. Our ministry with children and young people and families is in urgent need of this renewal. We need to focus prayer, energy, imagination and resources here. So, please as members of the Synod will you do all you can to ensure that every parish and every deanery engages with this agenda in the coming months, through contemplation, through compassion and through courageous action.

Not for the sake of the church but for the sake of God's kingdom and for the sake of the tens of thousands of children and young people and families we will serve through this vision: children who need a foundation; who need purpose; who need love and support; families who need community and practical help and guidance; young people who need investment and friendship and confidence; young adults who need models for living and all of them who need to know Jesus.

Jesus watches and listens and contemplates children and young people and families. Let's watch and listen with him and amplify their voices. Jesus contemplation leads him beyond the problems and Jesus is able to see as I hope we are, fields which are ripe for harvest.

Jesus has compassion on those he sees who are like sheep without a shepherd, mangled and cast down. Let's allow our hearts to be moved by that same compassion.

And Jesus has courage to take action both in prayer to the Lord of the harvest to send workers to the harvest field and to send out his own disciples to multiply the ministry he is able to offer. Can we too encourage, nurture, equip and send those who will be labourers in the harvest field? Thank you.