

Presidential Address to the Salisbury Diocesan Synod Market Lavington, 06/11/10

Thank you for your prayers and messages of support for my having been chosen to be the next Bishop of Ely. Naturally, I have mixed feelings about leaving Salisbury. You have been responsible for my formation as a bishop and this is what has prepared me for this next part of the adventure with Christ and with his other disciples and friends east of here. My installation will be in the early part of 2011 and I should be delighted if some of you travel to the Fens to support me - and to let people know what they are in for. Someone has already told me that I shall be the second biggest structure in the Diocese after Ely Cathedral.

I shall not move until January, but I shall step away from public ministry in Salisbury from 6th December. I shall return as the visiting preacher at Christmas in Ramsbury and at the Cathedral. From 6th December, Bishop Christopher Herbert will formally take on responsibility as the Archbishop's Delegate for the remainder of the vacancy, working closely with Bishop Graham and the Bishop's Staff. Bishop Christopher has been a highly regarded diocesan bishop until recently, well-known for his warm pastoral gifts and passion for uncovering the patterns of God both in the every day and in art and literature. I know that you will enjoy him, and he you.

I have rarely been the victim of size-ism aimed at the larger person. I generally subscribe to Maya Angelou's dictum: "Be glad to be big, 'cos in the winter we're warm and in the summer we're shade." However, I have been uncomfortable about the way people have been throwing around the word 'big' so carelessly of late. We have just witnessed the American mid-term election in which the electorate punished Mr Obama and the Democrats for making such slow progress in turning around the economy. I seem to remember having taught school boys that a certain Boston Tea Party may have contributed to the American War of Independence. Now we see the impact of the Tea Party Movement in the United States which is fed up not only with Obama but with Washington establishment Republicans, too. They want America to be great but with a very small federal budget. We have to hope that once the rhetoric dies down that there will be enough common ground between the President and the Congress at least actively to promote the economic recovery in America. We must pray fervently that the shape of things to come is not gridlock and stasis: what happens over there mostly comes here, so far as our economy is concerned.

Our Coalition Government is working hard to prove that the national interest is bigger than party advantage and I applaud this wholeheartedly. Dealing with the deficit is urgent and all of us are going to have to accept our share of the grief. No one gains from a huge burden of public debt. We are entering an era of austerity that may be like living the post War period again. There is a lot of talk about fairness of cuts across the board, evidenced by the restriction to be placed on Child Benefit. However, the spending cuts as so far described will not have an equal impact across society. Those who are already poor will get poorer. Poorer regions like the North East which I served for twenty years will face tougher cuts than Wiltshire and Dorset, starting from a worse funding situation. Talk about getting on the bus is simplistic and insulting to people who already travel across their region to work and who - if they sold their house in an adverse market - could not afford a house in the south of England. I have begun to pick up a rhetorical distinction being made in government parlance between the deserving and the undeserving poor. This worries me deeply. This kind of distinction finds no place in the Gospel. All of us are aware of the terrible trap of multi-generational unemployment in many poor families. Of course, people should be supported for going to work rather than doing nothing. But before we start

objectifying poor people so that we can abuse them, we have to come up with the real break out of the poverty and benefit trap. Just using shock treatment will have the effect of deepening child poverty. We should be very concerned about the combined effect of reduced access to social housing and cuts in housing benefit. This is not just something going on a long way from here. These issues are going to have a serious impact upon the rural poor in our own counties where there is already a shortage of affordable housing.

When the Prime Minister first began to talk about the Big Society, I was quite impressed. Not long ago, Bishop Graham and I were at the annual College of Bishops' meeting at which the key speaker was Baroness Warsi, the cabinet minister without portfolio who is responsible for the Big Society agenda. As a person of faith herself, she is absolutely behind the full engagement of the faith communities in building a more generous country with an even bigger heart. Precisely because we believe that Christ is that generous heart at the centre of it all, the Bishops in the House of Lords initiated a debate on the Big Society. I have some experience of working in the voluntary sector which provides already a great number of services to needy elements in the community. Nonetheless, the funding still needs to be there. Asking for a greater degree of volunteerism is fine. It would be wonderful if many more people gave of their time even if they need the incentive of nectar points to do it. However, the Big Society agenda must not be allowed to be the fig leaf which seeks to cover such a drastic rolling back of the state that would put the vulnerable at risk.

In Wiltshire which I know best, I thank God that so many Christian people from all of our churches are members of parish councils, deliver meals on wheels, run credit unions, assist in charity shops, serve as school governors, hear children read, do hospital and prison visiting, care for loved ones at home and save the state a fortune, collect food for food banks outside supermarkets, run youth clubs, scout and guide groups, act as street pastors, help run conservation projects, support international mission and justice organisations, etc., etc. We could be better about joining up some of these things with our Christian discipleship; but nobody doubts our existing commitment to volunteering. The Big Society is already here and flourishing in many of our communities in these two counties. We need better to celebrate and support what people are already doing. We need to recognise that all volunteering will be affected by delaying the retirement age and by less generous pension arrangements. We also need to be at the forefront of all attempts to work across the public, private and voluntary sectors. I have cherished the close co-operation which I have experienced with the leadership of Wiltshire Council during my whole time as a bishop in the county. I know that this applies also in Dorset and Poole. It was with local authority, commercial and university support that Bishop David took the initiative in November 2009 called *Back to the Future*. This initiative has continued to develop models of co-operation for joint tackling of key economic and social issues which face us in these two counties. Luke March and his team will be trialling the model for values-led responses to local issues in Weston/Littlemore in Weymouth and on Bemerton Heath in Salisbury.

Our Coalition Government deserves real credit for maintaining the overseas development budget. Charity may begin at home but only so that it can travel. The recession makes us introspective, worrying about our own needs. But the real test of big-hearted generosity and solidarity is as you give when you are hard up against it yourself. Big gifts come from meagre rations. That is what I have experienced in the generosity I received from our brothers and sisters in the Sudan. In the midst of our pre-occupation with the recession, we must remember Archbishop Daniel and all his people who are praying and working so hard for the Referendum on 9-11 January, 2011 which will determine whether or not a peaceful and prosperous future may ensue. They have the courage to pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as

in heaven.' Whatever we do has to be about building the kingdom of God, not as a political device but as the outworking of our belief in the transforming power of God. The Big Society is an invitation to be passionate about the gift which is the whole Earth.

I went to serve in Gateshead when I was preparing for ordination because I was inspired by the Church's 'Faith in the City' agenda of the mid-1980's which was aimed more at the Church than it was at society. Any assessment of the Big Society must take account of our calling to be a Big Church. We have nothing to say to our society unless that is our hope. We expect to be a big space into which many new disciples are welcome. Our commitment to the Five Marks of Mission is the basis for joined up praying and action in a way which unites ambitious evangelism and far-reaching social action in a healthy continuum. We need to press ahead with pioneer ministries and fresh expressions to get alongside with whom we usually find it hard to engage seriously. But we need a renewed generosity about the big picture of ministry in our parishes. If we are not larger than life locally, we have nowhere to go. This is why we say that a vacancy in a parish is a time for growth and change, not for anxious waiting on a new vicar. This applies just as much to a diocese in vacancy. The next Bishop of Salisbury will be thrilled to join a vibrant forward-looking diocese supporting flourishing and risk-taking communities.

If we are to make the most of what God is revealing to us then we shall need to have a bigger vision in the coming years about the ministry which has been entrusted to us. Two of our archdeacons, John and Paul, have just returned from a diocesan visit to our sister diocese of Evreux in Normandy. There are patterns of shared leadership between lay people and clergy which they are piloting from which Salisbury can learn. We are developing similar models in some of our team ministries. John and Paul will be coming to the next Synod in February with some possibilities to discuss. All of this is possible within our existing structures. The number of stipendiary clergy will continue to diminish over the next twenty years. This is a real opportunity and not a disaster. Just as Salisbury has been at the forefront of the development of new forms of ordained ministry, so I am confident that other dioceses will be looking to Salisbury as it develops new patterns of shared leadership which not only release the gifts and authority of the whole people of God, but also create new energy for mission and pastoral care.

This bigger vision of ministry as a gift to us brings us to the whole matter of our consecrating and ordaining women as bishops in the Church of God. The Church of England has already determined the principle. Women will be bishops in the future and I hope as soon as possible. The decision before the Church over the next two years is whether the draft legislation before us does the job, along with whatever is devised as a code of practice, in enabling us to be that Big Church. The vision of that Big Church, I believe, requires us to move forward to that day when women and men occupy all orders of ministry. We must also seek as generously as we can to keep as many as possible with us who cannot in conscience accept the ministry of women as bishops, or the ministry of bishops like me who will share in their consecration. It is still a wide open question whether this legislation will be passed. Some are committed to voting against it whatever happens. It is possible that people in favour of the legislation could vote against what finally appears if it fails robustly enough to support women's call to the episcopate and their exercise of authority within it. This is why what we do here today and in our deaneries is so vital. We all need to be made aware of the issues and engage in debate which is informed by prayer and by a big heart reaching out to those with whom we disagree. There is just a faint hope here that we could confound wider society by the quality of our dealing with each other on this matter. So far as the Ordinariate is concerned, I know that our Archbishops are going to be working closely with the Archbishop of Westminster to care for the small number of people involved.

One of the effects of Episcopal ordination upon men – as you may have noticed – is to make us more rotund. We are bigger bodies than we once were. Part of our recognition of shared leadership and one ministry is the challenge to love the local and be ready look wider. We go deep to think big. Seeking to be one body in Christ involves making space for one another. Working as one body is not a new concept but one which I trust you will inhabit afresh in the time ahead. I have a vision of thriving local churches which are largely lay-led and which come together for celebration, teaching and learning in larger groupings. I am confident that God will equip us in this pattern to be active servants across our communities at a variety of levels depending upon our interest and skills. We need a new model of how we work not just on behalf of our churches, but also of our schools. If we are going to be genuinely all-age communities then we have to get to grips with enabling our children and young people to be real participants in all we do. Children are not the Church of tomorrow. They are full players in the Church of today and the leaders of the Church in the future. I am a member of a children's prayer group in one of our primary schools in which profound insight is offered about the world by some very young Christians. From the hearts and mouths of babes we have a lot to learn.

Such a commitment needs support. This is what the Diocese is for: to support our parishes, schools and networks in growing the Church to build the Kingdom. A real commitment has been made by the Bishop's Council to improve the quality and depth of that support by closer working as one body by all central services, education, ministry and the Cathedral. This may involve bringing services more usefully together on new premises. This may happen or it may not prove achievable. Whatever happens about real estate, the commitment to a new pattern of working is real and permanent. I have set up a Strategy Review Group chaired by the Archdeacon of Wilts which will report to the Bishop's Council in January to advance this cause. You will be relieved that there will be not be yet another new strategy but an effective distillation of what we already have so that our values and primary targets can all be clearly set out on something the size of a visa card so that we can carry it around in our pocket or purse.

Our Archbishop has described our Christian Tradition - the Scriptures and the life of the Church – not as a constricting space but as a large room for us to inhabit. I believe this passionately. We are a learning Church facing many challenges. It won't do anymore for people to say, "oh well, that went above our head and it's nothing to do with us." All of us are called to stand on tiptoe, look to see what God is doing, and join in.

+Stephen Conway