



## Travelling well together

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### 1. Introduction by the Bishop of Chelmsford

The churches and the communities we serve have been through and remain in a period of significant change and challenge. Many are still coming to terms with the impact of the pandemic both in terms of practical realities and psychological impact. Inequalities have been exposed in society which are now further exacerbated by an economic crisis and the rise in the cost of living. Millions of people in this country are homeless or in inadequate and temporary accommodation. Schools and national institutions such as the NHS are struggling with lack of resources. The gap between rich and poor is growing at a frightening rate and the number of people relying on foodbanks is on the rise.

It is into this context that we are called to be the church, the body of Christ. And yet so much is changing in the church too. Numbers are decreasing, we have lost the influence we once had in society, and we are riven by internal struggles that soak up energy and threaten our shared life. Through all these changes in church and society we are striving to discern how to remain faithful, how to be the body of Christ in Chelmsford Diocese, how to travel well into the future.

The approach outlined in this short document is invitational and based on the principle that *how* we journey is more important than the exact nature of the destination or the precise details of what we do. The approach assumes that the body of Christ has many parts, that the fruits of the Spirit are varied and diverse but that we are called to be one (1 Corinthians 12 and John 17). We need one another, and our gift to the world is to share the good news of Jesus Christ in word and action by choosing to be those whose lives demonstrate love for God and love for neighbour.

Within that overarching principle there are many differences of emphasis between us, and our priorities will reflect varying expressions of theology. Some will emphasise social justice and others the call to make disciples – both, in fact, are equally important. But to be the church we need one another, for the body has many parts. If we want to be close to Jesus we must be close to one another for Jesus calls us *all* to be his friends and that means loving him as well as loving each other (John 15). In other words, we cannot choose our fellow travellers and, as a Diocese - the Chelmsford shaped body of Christ - we are greater than the sum of our parts and will strengthen our familial bonds by developing a stronger diocesan identity. For this next phase of our life we are called to build on all that has been good about the past, to leave behind those things that will hinder our journey onwards and emphasise the importance of *travelling well together*.



The values articulated below are not a statement of faith but rather a statement of intent. They are not a prescription for what we are *to do* but propose a method of *being*. They have the potential to draw us together as a diocesan family whilst allowing local discernment around the specifics of how we express our faith and what activities are undertaken in response. You are invited to engage with the values both at a personal level as individual disciples, for we must each inhabit them first ourselves, but also at a communal level in your churches, PCCs and other groups. You are invited to use the values as the basis for conversations and to facilitate decision making – to be “clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3. 27) as you seek to discern your vocation to love God, share the good news of Jesus Christ and serve your community. And as such the values should be held in tension together. Some may be more relevant in your area than others but if one or two are taken in isolation they will likely lose their power both to encourage, and to challenge assumptions.

For the foreseeable future, there will be no more diocesan initiatives outlining common approaches to mission and evangelism. Rather, we are seeking to tip the traditional organisational hierarchy on its head, to enable and empower local churches and worshipping communities to discern for yourselves what it means to be God’s people in your particular part of the world.

A note of caution: this is not the easy option. In the case of more traditional strategies, you are asked to follow a specific programme. If, over time and according to the set criteria, the programme appears not to bear fruit, the temptation is to feel ‘done to’ and point the finger of blame elsewhere. By contrast, this values-based approach requires you to be fully engaged and to take responsibility yourselves for discerning God’s call, acting upon it and seeking support where appropriate. And it requires all of us to be realistic about the future and our financial resources, and to be open to the unexpected and surprising – the Holy Spirit blows where she will and in every age God provides the church with the resources needed to be the body of Christ.

In some areas of our shared life there will, of course, still be leadership from the bishops, the Diocesan Secretary and those with wider diocesan responsibilities but we will seek to lead with honesty, transparency and as much consultation as possible. For the most part, our task will be to come alongside and to provide the support you need to enable you to fulfil the vocation you have discerned locally. To this end, we will in due course begin a diocese wide conversation that will help us better understand how best we can use the resources God has given us to provide the support most needed.

Let me now offer a personal word about the theology underpinning the direction of travel that I’m seeking to articulate. Inevitably in my role as your diocesan bishop the approach has been shaped by my own faith journey and the experiences that have informed it, as well as by the conversations I’ve had with colleagues and by the deep and prayerful listening I have sought to do since arriving in the Diocese. Forgive this introspective section but I hope it will help shed light on my thinking and show some of my working, as it were.

As many of you know, I was born into the tiny Anglican church in Iran where my early faith was fostered. I had an unusual but happy childhood in which our church community existed peaceably (as a very small minority), alongside the majority Muslim population. We were always marginal but sought to be light and salt in the wider community especially through the work of our schools and



hospitals which provided opportunities for evangelism as well as service. While I was growing up in the late 1960s and 70s indigenous leadership was being developed and the church was becoming less dependent on the foreign (mainly British) missionary presence. We were seeking to define our identity as both fully Christian and fully Persian. This wasn't straightforward in a context where social, religious and national identities are so closely bound. To be Persian is to be Muslim and so by virtue of our faith as Christians we were regarded as outsiders of a sort. All of this, together with the 40 plus years of living in exile in this country, has continued to impact my thinking around themes of displacement, belonging and identity within the life of faith.

Then in 1979 came the Islamic Revolution which swept through Iran and turned our lives upside down. Our schools and hospitals were confiscated or closed down, our financial assets were frozen and our legal identity removed. Church offices were ransacked and property damaged or appropriated. Foreign missionaries were recalled home, others fled or were forced to leave, some were imprisoned, injured in attacks on their life or assassinated. It seemed that the church was being stripped of all that had been built up by faithful Christians over several generations. Things that had been good and had been blessed by God were indeed taken away but in the process we were being invited to learn the meaning of discipleship in new and deeper ways.

Forty years on, numbers are now so small as to be virtually insignificant, the infrastructure is practically non-existent, leadership is scant, baptisms are illegal and the persecuted community live under daily pressure and uncertainty about the future. Arguably, the Anglican church in Iran was a human experiment that failed. And yet ... against all odds the faithful remnant remain. They are small in number, utterly marginal and without influence in wider society, and their survival seems to hang in the balance. But they are there. They are present and they are faithful. And while they remain they speak of God's love and faithfulness and they witness to the miracle of life in Jesus Christ, and in so doing they offer hope for all of us. Yes, they are small and insignificant in worldly terms, they have no institutions and in some cases no church buildings either, but in God's sight they are like the priceless precious pearl: loved, valued and nurtured.

And more than that, over the past forty years or so, without missionary support or institutions, with very few resources, without leadership to provide long term vision or strategies for growth, the Holy Spirit has been active in Iran. Despite human weakness, and during a period that should have seen Christianity eradicated, there has been an extraordinary surge in the number of those who are exploring faith and coming to Christ, often through the underground church movement and often at great cost to individuals and their families. Surely this is a lesson for us – a gift offered by the persecuted church: that when given space to breath, the Holy Spirit works through our fragility, brokenness and failures. Our task is not to control our way into the future but to lean on God, prayerfully discerning the next step of the journey, seeking always to be faithful in the present moment.

So all of this has given me a theology that is cross shaped and yet full of hope. A theology which allows for transformation through suffering, which values that which is small and marginal and which relies on trust in the one who leads us into the future one step at a time. The resurrection too is seen through the lens of the cross. It is not triumphalist nor does it speak of worldly power and influence. Rather, it offers us a glimpse of God's Kingdom and God's true nature as shown in the



example of Jesus Christ whose moment of greatest suffering was also his moment of greatest glory. This turns upside down our notions of success and offers us a pathway from fear and anxiety towards hope.

The church in this country is undoubtedly changing and we don't quite know what the future looks like. Change is always painful and as we seek to move forward faithfully there will be difficult decisions we have to take and there will undoubtedly be challenges. But "if God is for us", no one and nothing "is against us" (Romans 8. 31), and therein lies our hope. The future of the Church is in the hands of God who will lead us one step at a time. In the words of St. David, all that is required of us is "to be joyful, keep the faith and do the little things well".

And finally, the journey you are being invited on is exactly that – a journey. It is not the end point but is simply for this next phase of our life together. If we live it well, who knows where it might take us. The values are not a template for ever and they are not prescriptive. But they have been discerned prayerfully and carefully by myself and others tasked with leadership in this diocese and they speak profoundly of what it means to live as Christians. They are derived from the example of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and from the fruits of the Spirit. They are a call to "hold fast to what is good" (Romans 9. 12) and they offer a direction of travel for this season as we continue to discern God's call together.

+Guli Chelmsford  
Epiphany 2023

## 2. Articulating our direction of travel and Shared Diocesan Values

- Our *purpose* is to love God and to love our neighbour; to worship faithfully and empowered by the Holy Spirit witness to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ as we serve the extraordinarily diverse array of local communities in Essex and East London.
- Our *approach* is to enable and empower parishes and worshipping communities to discern how they are to be God's people in their own very different local contexts and as part of one diocesan family.
- Underpinning our approach is an invitation to a way of being articulated by *shared diocesan values* which might shape how we travel together, support each other and provide mutual accountability.



## **Values to frame how we travel well together**

### **Awareness of grace.**

God always provides the resources required for the mission of the church to continue. An awareness of grace engenders a spirit of thankfulness and enables us to notice what we have, rather than grieve for what we lack.

### **Valuing the small, the vulnerable and the marginal.**

Our calling is not to strain after worldly success, influence and power but to be a faithful and gentle presence and trust that God will use our conversations, encounters and all our efforts in ways we may never fully understand. Where there is growth we will rejoice and offer encouragement, whilst always remembering that God also treasures that which is small and fragile and we are invited to do the same.

### **Focusing outward.**

We are called always to look to the needs of those beyond the Church. When we fail to do this we risk becoming embroiled in our own internal divisions. Instead we are invited to join in God's mission, embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, to share the good news, to serve our neighbours, and to work for greater justice, especially for those who are most oppressed and marginalised.

### **Sustaining healthy rhythms.**

We are invited to live life in all its fulness. This requires us to take personal responsibility, making time for leisure, recreation, prayer and service. It also requires us to support one another, sometimes carrying those who are struggling most.

### **Kindness, mutual respect, gentleness and humility.**

These are virtues which are often underestimated and undervalued. They flow out of Jesus' command that we should love one another. To embody them we need to practice them intentionally, treating others as we would want to be treated ourselves and assuming the best of one another. This will enable us to develop greater trust.

### **Generously collaborative.**

A willingness to work well with others in a spirit of open honesty and transparency and with appropriate realism and accountability. To form partnerships that welcome challenge and help celebrate our differences, mindful of our need for one another. Together we are greater than the sum of our parts, together our narrow vision is broadened, together we make up the body of Christ.

### **Faithful, creative, courageous and open to the unexpected and surprising.**

There is a paradox in our faith which requires us to hold in tension the calling to be faithful to the traditions we have received, whilst at the same time open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit who continues to lead us into all truth.



### 3. Moving forward

So what might this approach look like as we move forward and how might it differ from what has gone before? What, in short, is your response, both individually and locally? What will be the vision of your church as you seek to fulfil your particular vocation and live out God's call in practical ways? What does loving God and serving your neighbour look like in your area?

This approach seeks to build on what has gone before. There is much that Transforming Presence brought to the life of our Diocese and to different local contexts. There is nothing about its four priorities (to inhabit the world distinctively, evangelise effectively, serve with accountability and re-imagine ministry), that any of us would disagree with or wouldn't want to promote. But it is now time to build on its foundations by emphasising, at a diocesan level, not *what we need to do* (that will be articulated locally) but, guided by shared values, *how we are to live*. Where there are elements of Transforming Presence, for example MMUs, that are of value to a local context then they should continue to be utilised. Where MMUs have not proved possible or fruitful there should still be an awareness that the future is about partnerships. A willingness to work well with others is increasingly important.

- For those who appreciate icons, this approach, rather like the Rublev icon of the Holy Trinity, seeks to draw you in – it beckons you to join in and participate.
- The approach is invitational. Parishes, deaneries and worshipping communities will be invited to make use of the approach and consider how the values speak to and support their own local context.
- These values will underpin how we take decisions more widely for the diocese including complex and difficult decisions. Our hope is that the values will also help decision making in more local contexts: in deaneries and parishes, providing a framework for conversations.
- Enabling and empowering parishes, deaneries and worshipping communities to discern how they are to be God's people in their own very different contexts and as part of one diocesan family, means moving beyond top-down diocesan initiatives and programmes.
- This approach will require a change in how parishes, deaneries and worshipping communities are supported by the diocesan office and area teams. In keeping with the diocesan values, our intention is to undertake a listening and engagement exercise during 2023 to understand from parishes and worshipping communities how we can develop our approach to providing support and resources. This will help to shape staffing and structures so that parishes can be best supported.



- Over the coming months we will continue this conversation in order to introduce and develop the approach and we will provide a study guide for those who would like to engage more deeply with the values.
- Meanwhile, if you would like a conversation or further support in how to use this document and the values, please contact your Archdeacon and/or Area Dean.

### Prayer

God of the journey,  
you invite us to travel well together  
as the body of Christ  
in the Diocese of Chelmsford:  
enlarge our hearts with  
    an awareness of your grace,  
    the knowledge of your presence,  
    and an openness to your calling,  
that, with gratitude for the past,  
we may step out with confidence into your future;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
Amen.

