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*Diocesan 66th session of
Synod*



26TH OCTOBER
2023

BISHOP'S CHARGE

*The Rt Revd Dr
Steve Moreo*



100

Diocesan Synod
Opening Eucharist



26TH OCTOBER 2023

17H00

St John's College Chapel
St David, Houghton Estate Johannesburg
President & Preacher

The Rt Revd Dr
Steve Marea

**CHARGE TO THE SYNOD THE DIOCESE OF JOHANNESBURG BY
THE RIGHT REVEREND STEVE MOREO, BISHOP OF
JOHANNESBURG, DELIVERED AT ST JOHN'S COLLEGE CHAPEL,
AT 17h00 ON THURSDAY, 26 OCTOBER 2023**

It is a privilege to greet you in the name of our Lord to deliver my final Charge as the Bishop of Johannesburg. Much has happened in the time that has elapsed since my previous Charge. I have no doubt that as I speak now, you all have multiple recollections of what has occurred since then. Those with good memories will recall that I had charged you to implement (1) Intentional Discipleship, (2) Intentionally activate children and youth ministries, and (3) Become pro-active and successful in Clergy and lay Leadership Formation. I wonder how many of us would spontaneously have named those three matters of importance *before* calling to mind the dramatic events of these past years. It is *because* we continue to be a Church that says we minister contextually, that we probably would not have done so.

The first thing that must surely come to mind is the Covid-19 Pandemic. None of us would have put this on our list of expectations the Church would be called to deal with when we listened to my Charge delivered in St Margaret's in Bedfordview in 2017. Covid-19 or the Coronavirus caught us all on the back foot. Covid-19 was a deadly and debilitating disease. Even today, some people have what is called Long Covid.

According to the World Health Organisation more than one hundred thousand people died from Covid in South Africa alone – out of a total of more than four million cases. I doubt that there is anyone sitting here who was not impacted because we all know of someone *directly* affected by Covid. It is important that we should pause here and remember that there are still people who are suffering with the disease. Deaths from Covid strains still occur.

Let us remember it was not just our Diocese that suffered. It was the Church worldwide, people of other faiths; people of no faith.

People from every walk of life went the extra mile for the Covid-19 stranger-patient in their care. Covid was the ultimate storm for many that brought about despair, anguish, death and grief.

Let us pause for a moment, and call to mind the words of St Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5, verses 16 to 22:

**Always be joyful; pray continually;
give thanks whatever happens; for this is what
God wills for you in Christ Jesus.
Do not stifle inspiration or despise prophetic
utterances but test them all; keep hold of what
is good and avoid all forms of evil.**

Please now join with me in this prayer of gratitude which is part of a Litany from the Catholic Bishops' Conference held in the Philippines.

Loving God, no thought of ours is unknown to You. No tear we shed is unimportant to You. No joy we celebrate is alien to You. You entered our world of sickness, suffering and death and You know the fears we face. Accept our thanksgiving for Your provident love during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As you wept at the death of Lazarus, breathe the breath of life everlasting on all those who died from Coronavirus.

Accept our thanksgiving for the heroic kindness of those who provided us with scientific, social and spiritual help when doing so was both risky and life threatening for them.

Accept our thanksgiving for the gift of newly discovered medicines and vaccines to combat the virus and the wonder of natural immunity.

Accept our thanksgiving for the gift of assuring presence, when we were anxious and distressed, depressed, lonely and impatient during the pandemic.

You have turned our fears into joy and for this we thank and praise You. To you be glory now and forever. AMEN

The Church responded positively to the challenge of the Covid pandemic, continuing to minister by Word and Sacrament and pastoral support. Government also responded. Regrettably, though, many of the memories we can recall are of the poor response of our government to the needs of its people.

Let me cite a few that are still with us.

The Zondo Commission into State Capture exposed issues such as fraud and corruption in South Africa - all to the benefit of a small and privileged cadre of South Africans and to the permanent detriment of us all. Very few of those found culpable by the Zondo Commission have been brought to book. I think I would be right in saying that many South Africans have shrugged their shoulders, concluding that not much will happen to those exposed by the Commission.

The third major event that has occurred in this interval between Synods is the choking of basic essential services - electricity, clean water, access to good health services, outstanding education for our children, eradication of crime and protection of the poor and vulnerable.

These are basic services on which depend the sustenance, growth, productivity, well-being and future vision of a rainbow nation.

None of these basic services, and others not mentioned, have been carried out to the extent that we would wish to offer a prayer of thanksgiving as we did for the services provided to address Covid-19.

Stable electricity supply can be summed up in one word: disastrous. As a nation we have watched the clumsy way in which Government has handled the management of the once world-renowned Eskom – to the point where the electricity infrastructure has all but collapsed.

Our health services are no better. New reports appear almost daily of dreadful problems in our public health services.

In our own Diocese, the once renowned teaching hospital, the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital has had huge problems, and it is sometimes only through the commitment of medical staff that care is given and to them we owe a debt of gratitude.

It is worth noting a media report in this “Month of Mental Health Awareness” that tells of horrific conditions in the psychiatric ward in this hospital.

Then there is the matter of pot-able water throughout the country. It is common to hear reports of pollution in our water supply, and incidents of cholera outbreaks as a result of compromised water. It is then that we realise that the Nation is not being a good steward of God’s gift of water.

The next recurring occurrence is the high level of crime. We all know this situation so well that I shall not dwell on the inability of our authorities to deal with the situation.

The South African education crisis is more severe than many of us understand. Even as I was preparing last week to address you tonight, the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust released an education research report that showed that 80% of Grade 6 mathematics learners were taught by teachers with a mathematics subject knowledge below that same level. The report makes for grim reading. This is a dire situation for the future.

It is nevertheless important to ask what we, with a fine tradition of education, are doing about this state of affairs. The Diocese has achieved many positive outcomes through the Vuleka schools over many years, but these schools are also facing challenges at present. However, we all owe a debt of gratitude to our diocesan schools. They all continue to make excellent progress across all disciplines.

Local government plays its part in the lack of the supply of service delivery. In our City of Johannesburg, think of the recurring pollution of our streets to which I had to draw public attention to this year on Palm Sunday.

Promises are made, but service accountability is so poor that the streets are continually littered in such a way that they are a security and health hazard.

So I ask myself what good has happened in the interval between my last Charge and this one?

The most obvious answer – albeit on a lighter note – is two Rugby World Cups. The Springbok captain, Siya Kolisi, lifted the William Webb Ellis Rugby Trophy high, together with his Springbok teammates, at the last World Cup in Japan.

In fact, South Africa's name appears on that trophy three times. Whether it will appear again this year remains to be seen. I am sure we were all very nervous throughout the semi-final we played this past Saturday, but the Boks persevered and we are now through to the final against South Africa's traditional rugby foe, the All Blacks. I am sure many of us will be praying that Siya Kolisi can lift the trophy for the second successive time.

That trophy is named in honour of a boy named William Webb Ellis at the Rugby School in England who, during a game of normal football, picked up the ball and ran and dotted down the ball thus creating the first "rugby" style of play.

But how many of us know that the young Webb Ellis left school, went to Oxford University, and became the Reverend William Webb Ellis! He received his MA in 1831, entered the Church of England and became Chaplain of St George's Chapel in London, and occupied other clergy posts after that. My interest in him is not his career, but that he is said to have founded the game of rugby which has a following of millions - and outstanding leaders such as Siya Kolisi.

In South Africa, contrary to all the expectations when democracy dawned in 1994, rugby has shown more ability to unite South Africans than any Government has done.

It has also empowered women to participate so that we see women referees handling men's rugby, and a growing popularity among

women. If you marvel at rugby's ability to unite people, think back to the moment when Nelson Mandela held aloft the William Webb Ellis Trophy with Francois Pienaar, the then Springbok captain.

But I revel not just in this moment of unity and joyfulness in sport. There is something much deeper here. What captures my imagination is that as a schoolboy, William Webb Ellis had the creativity to do the unusual and stimulate a worldwide sporting code. He went beyond the norm and had the courage to break out of the box – something we as a church seem to be nervous of doing. It is this nervousness of the Church to speak and act as the Body of Christ that reminds me of the words of Revd Dr Mongezi Guma in his paper, *When Jerusalem interfaces with Athens: being prophetic without grace*.

He writes: "We are called to serve 'the righteousness of God' in a *costly way* - a God who loves, wills, acts and redeems."

Underlining our everyday experiences, he submits: "... there is moral degeneration all around us. In commerce, in religious bodies, in politics, and be spiteful towards each other. The levels of crime, duplicity, loss of honesty and integrity, gender-based violence, driven by the advent of the default position of threats and violence against those who disagree have reached pandemic levels in our social life. The poor are victims of further exploitation. Civil servants are neither civil nor provide efficient service.....

All these are indicators of the collapse of the moral and social fabric of society. (The) culture of corruption is embedded in our societal processes that drives our lives. What we should admit publicly is that these continue to contain embedded systems of inequality."

It cannot be gainsaid that much of the cancer of the decay in our society has its roots in our history before 1994. But next year we will celebrate three decades of freedom and the degeneration all around us that has occurred in those 30 years is simply too big to ignore.

Allow me to paraphrase Dr Guma again: The danger we face in continually lamenting and blaming the past is that we apportion sin to everyone else, and righteousness only to us. It is time to stop lamenting the past and to be the people of the future. We need a church that has a prophetic role with grace - a church that encourages people like the young Web Ellis to break out of the norms and rules to create a good future for our children. Grace, says Dr Guma, is the core message of the bible. But grace also reminds us that we bear the responsibility to be participants in the reassured resurrected life of Jesus; the future of a new creation.

As a Church that has a rich history of creative service to the people, are we to sit back and continue to kick the ball down the road? Happy with the continuation of the immoral practices we see all around us? I am sure this cannot be so. Our prayer should be that we have the imagination and courage to break the mould of convention, pick up the ball, and run towards our goal.

Next year South Africa is to have its seventh general election since 1994. What should we do as Christians? My answer is simple: Vote. Later during Synod Bobby and Gillian Godsell will be addressing us about the Christian responsibility to vote. All I have said so far will underline the need for us as Christians to exercise the right for which we fought so hard.

As a nation we have been through the exhilaration of freedom. Regrettably we have seen that optimism turn to despair and, for the poor, the homeless, the marginalised... Well, for them, I would think the situation must fast be approaching one of anguish, gloom and desolation.

We have also been witness to recurring wars throughout the world. The current conflict in Gaza and Israel, and other areas of that region can so easily crush our optimism about our work as a Church. The Provincial Standing Committee has passed a motion addressing this terrible war in the cradle of our faith and, of course, the faith of others.

Let us continue to uphold the people involved in this war, and of others - such as the conflict in Ukraine, in our prayers day by day.

Our God is a God of Hope. But our God is also One who speaks in and through all that is created. That is true in the environmental crisis that the world is facing. But that is an intimate truth for us as the Body of Christ ***because we are all made in the image of our Creator***. How then can we ignore the groans of despair that come from the heart of Creation!

God is deep within all life – as People of the Resurrection we should implicitly understand that. Thus, we should listen deep within our beings to the needs of *all* Creation. We cannot look after ourselves in isolation. God abounds in the Cathedral of the sea, and the sky, and the earth – and in his people and all living beings.

Our God, however, is also one who does not spend time blaming the past, lamenting past errors and sins; in particular, the God we proclaim is one who forgives sinners. The great Holy Trinity we proclaim always moves forward, waiting for us to move in harmony with this amazing, spiritual being.

Allow me therefore, before I come to the specific **Calls to Action** in this Charge I wish to lay out before you, to express my hope that during our deliberations we will not fail to show appreciation to one another. I am not suggesting that we avoid dealing with issues honestly and robustly, but that when we do so, our aim should never be to discourage, but always to uplift. In each one of us, there is innate goodness. Often the best way to rid each other of the lower things in our interactions is to praise the higher things.

William Barclay shares the following story to highlight this point. He says, “It is told that once the Duke of Wellington’s cook gave notice and left him. He was asked why he left so honourable and well-paid a position. His answer was, ‘When the dinner is good the Duke never praises me, and when it is bad he never blames me; it was just not worthwhile’.”

Let us emulate Paul, like a good psychologist, and with true Christian tact, to always begin with praise even when he meant to criticise.

In 2021 our Diocese was grappling with a set of interconnected issues that has caused severe financial challenges. Some of these were ventilated in a series of meetings with the Clergy, Church Wardens, Organisations and Diocesan Schools.

This led me to appoint Mr Siviwe Dongwana to lead a turnaround process for the Diocese. We agreed to the initial steps for a turnaround strategy and timelines.

I am grateful to Mr Dongwana for agreeing to assist us. I was fully aware that the task was complex. He came in as a volunteer, with limited time and personal resources at his disposal. Our sincere gratitude goes to him for sharing his expertise with us. For me, he has been able to help give a better financial picture of the Diocese. This will assist the incoming Diocesan Trustees to discern wisely and make the right and speedy decisions to turn around our financial situation.

One of the urgent matters that will be before the new Board of Trustees will be how to re-purpose our properties. I believe that to do so, speedily and efficiently, we will have to budget, for at least a year, for a full-time person with the necessary skills and experience, to evaluate all our properties and advise the Trustees as to what should be the successful way forward.

There are always many people in our Church who work diligently and very hard to assist not only me, as your Bishop, but our Church as a whole. It is my privilege to thank such people, and I would begin by extending mine, and indeed, the Synod's thanks to these dedicated people of God.

The Revd Lynda Shimmin as our Interim Diocesan Officer through some of the most difficult times the Diocese has experienced. She came in at a time when we could not afford a replacement for a DEO. Moruti Lynda, thank you for your commitment and dedication as we seek to get back on track as the Diocese. Our sincere thanks go to your team in the Diocesan Central Administration office.

We give special thanks to Mr Sidney Place and Mr Keith Greenway. Both of them have been part of the finance working committee and have provided support to Revd Lynda. Another who provided support when asked is Mr Brian Smith. Our thanks go to him as well. Mr Place has also shared his expertise and given direction and guidance around tax, medical aid and post-retirement medical aid. He will report during the sessions of Synod on the post-retirement medical issues. We thank him for this.

I have appointed the following Diocesan Officials: Diocesan Chancellor - Advocate Itumeleng Phalane, Deputy Chancellor - Advocate Bongani Manentsa and as Deputy Registrar - Ms Tebogo Molefe. They joined Ms Tholoana Makhu our Registrar.

I am grateful to them that they have immediately formed a legal team that has addressed several issues most of which have involved property issues as highlighted in the IDEO report. Our thanks go out to the legal team and the Diocesan Executive.

The Diocesan Chapter met and had a conversation on the current state of the Diocese and a project proposal was presented. Chapter agreed and nominated Canon Peter Motlanthe to be the liaison person on behalf of Chapter who will work with the implementation team. I would like to thank Chapter members for their continued support as we find ways to continue to minister to the people of God. It is appropriate at this time to welcome new Chapter Canons, Ntate Peter Motlanthe, Mme Elsie McBasson and Mrs Nomsa Mgemana.

I would like to thank St Peter's College and Prep School, and St Mary's School, for their ongoing and regular donations and a substantial gift (R1-million) from St Michaels, Parish Villages, Weltevreden Park. It is my hope and prayer that the council of St John's College and other schools and organizations in our Diocese will also consider making donations to the Diocese, because of the bonds we share.

Members of the clergy and their spouses have given of their gifts in the difficult past years, not least during Covid-19 when additional resilience was required.

So too did the saints in our Diocese, many of them going the extra mile to keep our parishes functioning, our organisations in good order, and our schools on the cutting edge of excellent education.

My thanks are due also to Ruth and Theo Coggin who have given their time and shared their gifts of communication, editing and writing with me as Bishop, and the Diocese.

And then there is one important and faithful person to whom I – and our Diocese – owes a heartfelt debt of gratitude.

I speak, of course, of my wonderful wife, Liziwe. Thank you for being the strength in the background that you have always been.

Let me move towards the close of this Charge by saying that the Synod Advisory Committee has worked hard to bring about this moment when we can listen to our calling to be faithful to what my Charge is - to each one of us.

This is my Final Charge to you as your Bishop, before I retire in March 2025 (God willing). What, you will ask, is he directing us to do in grace to accomplish in the time that lies ahead?

The life of Jesus was filled with energy, creativity and out-of-the-box thinking and actions. The record is there for us all to read, study and implement.

My first call on you all therefore is to go back to your parishes, schools and organisations, and imagine what Jesus would be doing now to bring new life to your community.

Imagine big. Go beyond what you are doing at present.

Feeding schemes, soup kitchens and peanut butter sandwiches are all acts of compassion and service, but my beloved people, the people who use them usually come to us to visit.

Our imagination must **take us** to the people in our environment, where we can be seen as a dynamic, loving force for change and good.

Let your imagination stretch to where it should be – beyond the borders of your immediate parish. Listen to people with different ideas. Make your outreach one of talking to the stranger; become accustomed to talking to one another, and to listening.

Second, work to be an alternative community and a prophetic agent for change. Walter Bruggeman says about becoming the alternative community that is our calling as Christians: *“The formation of an alternative community with an alternative consciousness is so that the dominant culture and/or community may be criticised and dismantled. ... the only way to overcome despair was the public presentation of hope... (and) If we are to understand prophetic energising we must see that its characteristic idiom is hope which permits the community to engage in amazement and will not be prevented by despair of the community for whom everything has collapsed.”*

Working in this way fits perfectly with being an alternative community of Christians, one with courage who will engage with truth to those in power in your context, including government agencies and NGOs.

Third, build on one of the Charges I laid out previously – intentionally expand your children and youth ministries. Create joint initiatives that really grow the ministry.

Call together the educators and other thinkers in your parish to see how the Church can improve the woeful situation in our public educational system.

Fourth, purposely seek out new ways of spirituality that will cause the parish to act to embrace the stranger: those of a lot of faith, those of little faith, those seeking faith, those of no faith, those of a different faith. It’s the simple message of our Lord who died on the Cross.

And last is the simplest: **Don’t hide behind the rules and norms that form the conventions and traditions of our parishes.** Pick up the ball of new life and take it to everyone.

As I draw to a close, I do so in faith that you all will return to your parishes and homes after Synod to love and serve the Lord flowing from the five Calls to Action I have set out. So as the Gospel reminds us – be a light set on a hill for all to see – do not hide yourselves away! Be of good courage, serve the Lord with gladness so that our country will see your light and love in action as a power for good and transformation.

Praise be to God as you set yourselves on this path! Let us be a lighthouse in the changing world.

AMEN



Diocese of

Johannesburg

