

**THE DIOCESE OF SINGAPORE**  
**25<sup>th</sup> SESSION OF SYNOD (2<sup>nd</sup> MEETING)**  
**7<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2020**

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

**Greetings**

Good morning brothers and sisters in Christ, a very warm welcome to you and thank you for attending our synod meeting this morning.

We wish to acknowledge the presence of our brothers and sisters from the six deanery countries. Although we cannot be physically together, your online participation is significant to us because we are one big family under God. The diocese belongs to all of us and we pray that in Christ we will continue to grow in unity regardless of nationality, culture and race.

We also wish to congratulate our clergymen Moses, Ezra, Glenn, Ian, Kiat Lern and Thomas on your ordination to the Order of Priesthood in August. We will keep you in prayer and may our good Lord shower you with grace and mercy, and anoint you with the gifts of the Holy Spirit so that you can be effective and faithful in serving the people God has entrusted to you.

**Current Challenges**

The fact that we have to gather for Synod in this manner a second time is telling of the situation we are in. It is not an overstatement to say that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanity is historically unprecedented. The scale of its impact is direct, widespread and extensive, from economics and geopolitics, to medical infrastructure, social security and religious activity. The reality is that nobody is spared, albeit in different degrees, as the virus recognizes no boundaries. The challenges facing each of the seven countries in our diocese are unique, due to differing national contexts. Amid great difficulty and profound complexity, our primary task is to take good care of the elderly and children among us, and ensure that our people comply with safe management measures. As leaders, whether clergy or laity, it is our duty to keep our worship environments safe and protected, and pray that with God's help we are void of cluster transmissions.

Our pastoral duties ought to continue in the face of daunting obstacles. We praise God that with swift adaptation and use of online-technology, church activities in our diocese are able to continue. Not only have we found this a good platform for Sunday services, Christian education classes and fellowship gatherings, some of us have put our God-given creativity to good use by making it a friendly and effective place for evangelism. Efforts to continue ministries and ensure spiritual provisions have not been hampered by the crisis. This deserves acknowledgement and encouragement. We thank all of you who have worked so tirelessly and conscientiously behind the scene, and we pray that our good Lord will bless you and your families.

Although some among us are less ready than others to adapt to change, we can no longer ignore the fact that the use of the virtual platform is here to stay. We need not go into detail at this point about its pros and cons, or the positive and negative impact it has on our church life. Discussions, however, should be encouraged in our parishes. Our aim is to take advantage of technology without falling prey to it.

Related to the use of online-platforms to meet pastoral needs is the subject of Online Communion. Bishop Rennis had permitted it mainly for the Archdeaconry of Singapore for a period of three months. This dispensation expired on 31 October 2020. After receiving feedback from clergy colleagues here and with a clearer understanding of the needs and challenges of some churches in administering the Holy Communion, we have decided to extend the dispensation for the Archdeaconry of Singapore to 31 January 2021. We wish to underscore that Online Communion is an unusual practice permissible only for a period of time in extraordinary circumstance.

Besides Online Communion, the dispensation encompasses Reserved Communion and Onsite Communion. The intention behind providing options here is to enable us to better serve the people God. The vicar or priest-in-charge therefore has the liberty to decide which option to appropriate, including a combination of two, or even all three. The point is we have to be sensitive to our different church contexts and reasonable in our administrations.

Although online worship is now the new norm, we ought not to forget it can never replace onsite or physical worship in the church. As leaders we need to consistently educate and remind our church members the importance of returning to church as a form of spiritual discipline, with safe management measures in place. However convenient it is to just turn on the television or computer, our people should be mindful that this is only a stopgap measure. The danger of sliding into spiritual sluggishness is very real if we are not careful. Returning to church for service is a lot more meaningful and significant especially as the Christmas season draws near. As God's chosen leaders, we have to step up in guiding and encouraging our church members. We ourselves ought to set an example, more so in the midst of stormy weather.

### **Back to the essential**

What lessons can we learn from the COVID-19 pandemic? Why has God allowed it to happen? What is God telling us through this crisis? In the many conversations and discussions about the pandemic, "re-set" is a key word that keeps surfacing. Like it or not, the world and the church are being forced to pause. We have come to a standstill. It is as if a divine finger has pressed the re-set button, giving humanity a second chance to ask ourselves if we have derailed from God's purpose in managing the world. And, Christians are not being spared from it. Our Christian duty is both to the church and to the world, for we owe it to God who has created the world and entrusted it to us (Gen 1:28-30). We are responsible for managing God's creation, but have fallen short because of our insatiable human desires. It is rather ironic that during the lockdown, according to newspaper reports, the air pollution level of some major cities dropped drastically within just a few days.

God has a plan for the world: He wishes the world to be saved by His Son Jesus Christ. The salvation of God in Christ Jesus is as much about a blessed life here and now as it is about the future glory in eternity. We can grow and be transformed on this side of paradise if we allow ourselves to be nourished by the source of life (John 15:1-8).

In Paul's language, it is a process of weaning off milk so that we can take solid food (1 Cor 3:2). To Matthew, it cannot be anything other than becoming the light and salt of the world (Matt 5:13-16). In other words, we have a task and we need to ask how well we have fared in our growth in Christ and in managing the world (or marketplace) for God. What grade would we get if there is a test for us to take? Could COVID-19 be the test God has put on us so that we can have a realistic check of where we are spiritually? Can our ministries over the years

withstand the test of fire, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:13, that “each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done”?

We need to take stock and, if necessary, prune away things peripheral, however good and pretty they may seem. We need to go back to the core of the Gospel, or the bread-and-butter of the church, before getting distracted again. One may ask what is the core and what is the bread-and-butter of the church? Among the answers, we believe it all comes down to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) and the New Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40).

Do note that it is neither the former or the latter, but both together. If we focus on one more than the other, we are twisting the most important teachings of Jesus. To put it succinctly, being a disciple of Jesus and making disciples of all nations cannot be separate from God’s unconditional love nor our love for God. The danger, if we decouple the two, is a discipleship that is devoid of the sacrificial love of God. In its extreme form, it can turn into religious fanaticism. The Crusades is a good case in point, only if we look back at church history.

1 John 4:7-8 says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

We can be the disciples of Jesus and change the world by making disciples of all nations only when we know God and love one another with the unconditional love of God. Anything that falls short of this can dilute or compromise the standard God has originally intended. To reemphasize the Great Commission and the New Commandment is to go back to the core of the Gospel or the bread-and-butter of the church. We need to take stock to know where we are, before coming up with a plan for the future.

## **Looking ahead**

What would the diocese look like in the next three, five or ten years? This is a question about the vision and mission of our church. To spare us from a lengthy discussion, we can simply say that *vision* is about the unchanging goal that will last for generations, and *mission* is the task of the current generation to achieve the goal articulated in the vision.

If we can accept these definitions, and keep in mind what has just been said, our diocesan vision must therefore have a lot to do with being disciples of Jesus and making disciples of all nations with the love of God. Certainly, it is not just for one generation. The key point is: what can we do in our generation to make our diocese and our parishes a better place for the next generation to continue achieving the vision? This is our mission.

To put it slightly differently, it is about creating a culture of discipleship and growing our parishes into disciple-making churches. To some of us this may be a paradigm shift. It is certainly not easy. As leaders called by God, we need to ask if we are ready and willing to apply ourselves to it.

If our mission is to hand down a disciple-making church to the next generation so that they can take the ball and run with it, the answer seems obvious. Thus, we need to start talking about discipleship in our parishes and use it as a reference point for all of our ministries. For example, learning to look at our church through the lens of discipleship, asking how ministries can be related to or add strength to our growth in being Jesus’ disciples. Or, what plan do we

have to motivate one another to go out into the marketplace and make disciples with the love of God.

In some ways what I have just said should not be new to us. We thank God for what He has been given to us as a diocese. The synod report in your hands clearly testifies to a rich and diverse ministry a small diocese like ours could hardly ask for. We have mission works in the six deanery countries of Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam. Within Singapore, our diocese has ministries in nine schools, eight kindergartens, eight childcare centers, 27 community service centers and 27 parishes with multiple congregations.

Indeed, we have been faithful in building the body of Christ and sowing seeds of the Gospel in the lives of many through our wide and diverse ministries. As we receive the synod report today, we wish to thank you all for your hard work over the years and your steadfastness in running a good race without giving up, especially as we confront this pandemic that is unprecedented in human history and is pushing all of us to our very limit. We continue to keep you in prayer, and ask that through the amazing works of the Holy Spirit you are able to find deeper meaning in the twin-teachings of Jesus (the Great Commission and the New Commandment) in your lives and ministries, and grow stronger each day.

As we take stock and focus on the essential, certain areas deserve our attention and require some strengthening. A case in point is our diocesan training for both laity and clergy. We have some good training programs and we thank God for our brothers and sisters who have contributed so much to make that possible. As we move forward and focus on the essential as mentioned, extra hard work is needed to step up the training resources for both clergy and laity. Someone among us has to help look into it and prayerfully get it started sooner rather than later. Besides training, key areas such as chaplaincy work in our schools, our community services (SACS and SAMH), and also mission work in our deanery countries warrant our attention. As we carry out stocktaking in mission deaneries, schools, social services and parish ministries, it eventually entails postings because matching the right person to the right job becomes one main consideration among others.

Regarding recent postings, someone told me that the scale is unprecedented. He may be right, but I recall when Bishop John Chew was newly enthroned as the diocesan bishop in 2000, he soon initiated a posting that involved at least 15 clergymen. Referring to the big move, Bishop Chew had said, "we completed what could be the most extensive clergy movement at any one time in our history". The difference between then and now, however, is our current pandemic, which has added an extra level of complexity and challenge to the exercise. Clergy postings are never easy decisions to make and therefore early preparation and planning are much needed.

After much thought, consideration and committing it in prayer since February, the decision was made and soon announced in order to give sufficient time for the transition. Without question, it is not easy for the concerned pastors and the churches to make the adjustment. But by God's grace, all have embraced it well. Thus, we wish to thank you for your understanding, and your effort in helping us to strengthen one another as we move forward as one diocesan body to achieve the Great Commission and fulfil the New Commandment. As we close, let us be reminded again of the calling we have received and our first love for our Lord Jesus Christ. We can take courage and stay focussed in the middle of a huge storm and not lose heart, and continue to steer the ship to the end that God has destined, because the God who calls us to follow Him is the faithful God.

And God, in Isaiah 41:10, says, "fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Amen.

**The Rt Revd Dr Titus Chung**  
**BISHOP OF SINGAPORE**