

*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

*I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...*

**(Isaiah 43:19)**

It is two years since Advent 2016 when we entered into the adventure of our LIFE vision, discerned together through prayer and conversation. Throughout this time both Bishop Robert and I have spoken much of us seeking to discern what God is doing and join in, and we are very thankful for many stories across the diocese reflecting people's faithfulness and fruitfulness. We also recognise that in some places the joining in feels hard and painful, and in this season of Advent I am reminded of Mary's faithful 'yes' and the unfolding path of both joy and intense pain. Thank you for daring to walk paths of laying-down and death so that there might be greater abundance of life.

### **Advent Imagination:**

In my Presidential address to Diocesan Synod in November I spoke of my ongoing desire for us to learn more about *being church* [www.gloucester.anglican.org/2018/bishop-rachels-presidential-address](http://www.gloucester.anglican.org/2018/bishop-rachels-presidential-address) This requires us not only to be faithful and courageous but it also requires a continual willingness to see differently and to be bold in imagination as we stand in the present looking to the future. Led by the Holy Spirit it is about treasuring the riches of our inherited faith and lived tradition whilst also being continually alert to the new thing God is doing. This resonates with the season of Advent.

Advent is a time for rich imagination as we recall the evocative imagery of the Old Testament prophets dreaming of the future and the Messiah yet to come; and our imaginations are sparked by the songs of angels and the events surrounding the birth of a baby, Emmanuel, God with us.

Amid the world's current confusion and uncertainty our Advent and Christmas services will proclaim the truth that the darkness will never overcome the light, and we are urged to watch and wait as we confidently dream of that time yet to come when Christ will come again and God's work of making all things new will be complete.

### **Challenge for the Church:**

One of the Church's challenges as we delight in the hundreds and thousands who will attend Advent and Christmas services is how we invite people to dream with hope, and enable people of all ages and backgrounds to be drawn into the mystery of 'God with us' such that they desire to go further and deeper in discovering yet more of the living God who is making all things new.

And this leads me to something I hinted at in my presidential address to diocesan synod and which Bishop Robert and I now want to share more widely...

### **Wellsprings:**

Bishop's Council has recently made a commitment to explore a proposal for transforming our engagement with children, young people and their families (note my letter of September: [www.gloucester.anglican.org/2018/a-letter-from-bishop-rachel-2](http://www.gloucester.anglican.org/2018/a-letter-from-bishop-rachel-2))

The proposal resonates with the Leadership, Imagination, Faith and Engagement of our diocesan vision and is about doing church differently.

The vision is to create a pioneering network of fresh expressions in sports and wellness centres across the diocese, which serve their local communities and nourish people's bodies, minds and spirits.

Through sports, games, play, community activities and hospitality these centres will aim to build deep relationships and serve young people and families, both spiritually and physically. Through an approach based around coaching and mentoring we hope that every young person who comes to these centres will come to know life in all its fullness.

It is important to note that the definition of sports ministry we envisage is inclusive and will involve all forms of physical activity aimed at expressing and improving physical fitness and mental well-being. We believe we can reach people across ethnic, gender, ability and class differences, forming social relationships and creating welcoming communities.

Our dream is that these centres will become part of our diocesan body. They will work in collaboration with established worshipping communities and partner organisations and enrich our work with schools.

We believe this proposal will significantly contribute to a different perception of 'Church'. The centres will be primarily lay led and places where the young will be encouraged, for their faith to be nurtured, where they will have opportunities to lead and serve in sports activities and to shape and steer worship that's relevant to them. We believe that this will form part of our diocesan renewal and revitalisation as new ecclesial communities are formed and challenge our understanding of being Church.

What has been so exciting to witness is the real movement of the Spirit that has brought together a number of exciting and unique elements that has led to this proposal. It brings together all of our LIFE priorities with the **faith** in LIFE being the cornerstone for this transformative project.

I am giving you only the barest of outlines here because the imagining needs to be shaped into a proper business plan so that Bishop's Council can then take an informed decision. If the project goes ahead we will need to ensure that what we develop is sustainable. It will need investment in terms of people, time and finance involving funding from beyond the diocese as well as the allocation of some of our own financial resources, whilst ensuring that we do not compromise the shared resources we require to sustain healthy mission and ministry across our worshipping communities.

I am delighted to say that The Revd Tim Hastie-Smith is currently taking a lead on shaping the project proposal and furthering conversation with people across the diocese and nationally. Many of you will know Tim from his ministry as National Director of Scripture Union as well as his ministry in the South Cotswolds Team.

**Prayer in Advent:**

This Advent please join me and Bishop Robert in a commitment to pray for us all to be renewed in our imagining in our different local contexts as well as together as we seek God's wisdom about the proposal I have outlined. Let us all pray for God to inspire our imaginations as we seek to faithfully proclaim 'Emmanuel, God with us' in both old and new ways such that the 'with' is truly about all people of all ages and backgrounds.

This comes as ever with my thanks and prayers for our partnership in the gospel.

+ Rachel