

Presidential Address Diocesan Synod May 2025
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‘They graduate into the abyss’

I had a deeply sobering conversation this week with a brilliant professor from one of our universities here in Sussex. We were talking about student cohorts and the challenges they face. He said, “This generation of young adults is characterised by their lack of hope.” Full of potential, yet when they look to the future, what they see is not promise, but despair. “They graduate into the abyss,” he told me.

That phrase has stayed with me.

We are living through a time of profound cultural upheaval. In the months since we last met as Synod, we've marked the 80th anniversary of VE Day — but done so in the shadow of ongoing war in Ukraine and the Middle East; escalating tensions between India and Pakistan; continued conflict in the DRC, Syria, Yemen the list goes on.

The global rise in authoritarianism continues, a crisis of confidence in liberal democracies, the climate crisis. The trade war rhetoric rising again with the new Trump administration. Artificial Intelligence is advancing at an exponential rate, outpacing our ethics. A generation of men drawn (by influencers such as Andrew Tate) into toxic masculinity and the violence of pornography.

Millions of young adults burdened by debt, phone addiction, unaffordable housing and a widespread mental health crisis.

For the first time in modern Western history, the rising generation are not set to be happier or wealthier than their parents.

And yet, against this backdrop, something remarkable is happening: a spiritual awakening. What the Times has called ‘The Strange Rebirth of Christian England’¹

A prodigal generation is coming home.

There have been many months now of a steady flow of anecdotal stories. Prominent atheists like Ayaan Hirsi Ali have come to Christ. Highly influential speakers like Jordan Peterson and Tom Holland are advocating for the Christian world-view. Churches started experiencing notable numbers of people walking in off the street, with almost no Christian background, keen to come to faith, wanting to be led to Christ.

And then last month the Bible Society published a new independent research report from YouGov : called the *Quiet Revival*.

Not a small opinion poll, but a national survey with remarkable findings

1. Church attendance in the Uk is growing — especially among the young.

In five years, regular church attendance has risen from 8 to 12% of the population. Among young adults it *quadrupled* — from 4 to 16%. They are joining mainly catholic and pentecostal churches.

2. They are reporting that they are finding hope, purpose and connection by belonging to church, where they are learning to give of their time and money and find wellbeing in the household of faith.

3. And their peers, non-churchgoing young people are spiritually open. Curious about faith, prayer, and the bible, and happy to engage.

¹ M. Grant, The Times, 16th April 2025

The cultural shift is not just in this country.

In **Finland**, churchgoing among young adults has doubled.

In **France**, where normally 4000 baptisms happen at Easter, this year it was over 17,000.

I think of my conversation last year with **Bishop Philippe of Chartres**. When I told him I hoped for a few hundred youth pilgrims, he responded that his annual youth pilgrimage from Paris to Chartres now sees over *10,000* youth.

The focus of the Quiet Revival is in Catholic and pentecostal churches, but In the Church of England, and here in this diocese, it seems the tide is rising too.

We are not seeing growth of this kind in all our churches, but we are in some.

I grew up in Southend, on the Thames estuary, every day watching the tide rise and fall. And when it rises, of course not all the boats rise at the same time. The ones out closest to the deep permanent channel of the river - they rise first, and then eventually the water comes towards the shore and lifts everything.

And here in this diocese, I believe the tide is rising.

Last year we confirmed 450 people. The year before that we confirmed 450 people.

This MONTH we have confirmed over **250** people.

We have gone from 450 in a **year**, to 250 in one **month**, with many adults being baptised as well as confirmed because of the numbers of people coming to faith from no church background at all.

It is very exciting.

All the candidates are asked to write to me before their service to give me their testimony of becoming a follower of Jesus, and it is a great joy to read all these hundreds of unique stories.

Let me share just one, from **Nigel Jones**. Nigel is a journalist and this January he wrote an article in *The Spectator* where he wrote from the **perspective of a non-believer** about the decline of faith, saying almost none of the clergy seem to believe in real Christianity any more. The article ended with this, I quote - - “The tragedy of our dying Church is that when it finally disappears, few will gather around the grave to mourn an institution that has long since abdicated its real role.”.

Well, our Dean, Edward Dowler wrote to Nigel to say that actually in Chichester the Christian faith is alive and well, and the two of them met for conversation, and then the Holy Spirit did what the Holy Spirit does.

To Nigel’s surprise , his April article for the Spectator was something of a contrast with three months earlier. Nigel wrote ‘I have no family history of faith....[but now] I enter the mystery.. When I pray.. I ask for forgiveness for my own sins and errors. .. I can say in all truth this Easter: ‘Christ is risen – he is risen indeed’.

And so it was that on Wednesday of this week at the Cathedral, it was my great joy to meet Nigel to baptise and confirm him.

Synod — what might this mean for us?

This year, as we celebrate our **Year of Faith** — marking **950 years since the founding of Chichester Cathedral** and **1700 years of the Nicene Creed** — God is calling us not just to commemorate the past, but to respond to the present and build for the future.

To the church in Sardis in the book of Revelation, Jesus says ‘Wake up! Strengthen what remains’

Sardis was a city with an impressive citadel and proud of its history and prestigious reputation. But twice the people had been sleeping at night when invaders came and entered the city with no contest. So it will have stung their pride a bit to hear the word of the Lord - “Wake up!”

Jesus calls his church not to rest on the laurels of past reputation and not to be found sleeping , but to be alert, holy and repentant, faithfully tending to the green shoots of faith that are growing,

As the Spirit awakens prodigals and calls them home, we too must awaken. We must awaken to prayer and to a posture that is seriously expectant .

Let me offer two **encouragements** , **for every church in the diocese, rural and urban, big and small, old and young.**

1. Be prayerful! Be prayerful - specifically, three types of prayer

Rejoice in prayer when you read and hear of this news of fruit in your church or any other church. We rejoice in thanksgiving when we hear of prodigals finding that their homecoming journey takes them to Catholic and pentecostal churches. We pray for pope Leo 14th as he leads this season of such missional excitement. Let's not be competitive or cynical towards other denominations .

We can be circumspect and curious about the data and what it is really telling us. It is fine not to get carried away on a wave of hyperbole about wholesale revival. We need to stay honest about what is and is not happening. Be *curious*, Be curious if other churches are seeing what you are not - ask ourselves important questions but let's be people of praise and not cynicism.

With a gladness of Spirit may our prayer be rejoicing in God's saving grace for every person turning to Him.

Repent in prayer of any 'older-brother spirit' you may have. We must watch our heart - not to get jealous of other churches and not to get jealous of the prodigals. The danger for many of us will be to become the older brother in the prodigal story of Luke chapter 15 — the one who has stayed loyally with the Father, who didn't run off for a decade in Las Vegas, who has stayed in the house, in the religion, and worked for years.

The older brother was on his own without his sibling, the older brother would have liked a night at the casino but instead he put the work in,. The older brother paid his tithes and did the fundraising for the organ and the roof. The older brother got up every Saturday and mowed the church yard. The older brother had to serve 16 years on deanery synod because there was no one else around to step up.

And then that brother bitterly resents the party when his lost brother comes home. All this sudden joy, all this fuss, all this attention and focus, a robe and a ring and sandals and the fattened calf, the entire household pouring its best resources into an extravagant celebration. Look at our SDF funding and how focussed it has been on young people, look at our SMIB and DIP funding and how we want to invest millions in youth, children, and young families.

We all know that if the older brother had understood the heart of his Father he would have danced for joy. It is easy to judge the older brother until we discover that we are him, and we need the compassion of God on our weary and calloused hearts, and the heart transplant that only the Spirit of God can bring.

Renew your prayer life for those you know who do not know the Lord. Now is the time to pray with fasting and new confidence for non-believers to come to Christ.

Most church of England members are tired - it has been a long slog, hard to keep morale through years of decline, hard to keep loving and giving and serving. Maybe our fervent prayer has lessened off as it has perhaps been a long slog without seeing much fruit . Sometimes it feels like a lot of work to have kept the lights on.

Let's renew our intercessory prayer for evangelism. I have the great privilege of peripatetic ministry, I am in a different church every Sunday. I hear church intercessors pray for many many important and worthy things but I very rarely hear the intercessor pray for people in the community to become followers of Jesus.

SO – Rejoice in prayer, repent in prayer, renew your prayer to intercede for the lost.

Every awakening or revival of the church in history has been unique, but every single one has been a revival of prayer and holiness among God's people.

Secondly - Be expectant

If this is not happening yet in your church, act now in faith to get yourselves ready for when it does.

The one biggest determining factor of a growing church is being a church that agreed: 'we want to grow. We want to see new people become followers of Jesus. We will prepare ourselves for that to happen in our midst'

I am a parent of an 18 yr old and so this year we have been visiting university open days. We went to a few and often came home a bit overwhelmed by the hassle and the stress of the day. Then last month we visited one uni in the midlands and it was a brilliant experience. They had mastered the art and science of hospitality. They had thought everything through from the perspective of the visitor. It was easy to park. There were welcomers giving out maps and directions. There were guides to show you around and answer all your questions in a friendly way. We came home and immediately signed up for this university.

The message was - "we have been expecting you. We have thought about you in advance. You are welcome here."

We have been waiting for you! We have been expecting you! If the prodigals aren't yet showing up in your church, prepare for them anyway. Set the table. Light the lamp. Be ready.

The quiet revival is not about being slick or modern or clever in your church. It is not about your church marketing itself. There is no magic trick , no one style of worship, it's diverse, no one course or programme or type of building or kind of music. **This is far broader and far more of God than a human success at suddenly finding the one silver bullet that makes disinterested atheists surrender to the gospel.**

The rising generation is looking for **ancient things not gimmicks, deep truths not superficial answers, challenging discipline not easy fixes.**

The new disciples - they like old people, they like the BCP, they want the sacraments, they are hungry for transcendence and mystery.

We have all these treasures.

So let's get every church website ready, on your homepage to say this is exactly where we are, when we meet, here is how to attend, we are expecting you.

Let's get our welcome teams ready , and be ready with a supply of bibles to give people. Lets get mentors ready to walk with people to disciple them.

Just last week, one “TikTok vicar” posted out **27 Bibles** — connecting young adults new to faith, to local churches for discipleship.

In the Catholic church in France they are working hard and fast to mobilise the **laity** as disciplers. What training does your congregation need for everyone to know how to lead someone to become a follower of Jesus, and how to walk with them as they learn the ancient paths and spiritual disciplines of prayer, bible study, communion, service?

In this diocese New catechesis materials are coming very soon — including a digital app to help us ground new believers in ancient truth.

SO Synod, be encouraged. The tide is rising. The prodigal generation is coming home. And the Father is running out to meet them.

Let us awaken to the hour. Let us strengthen what remains.

There is a generation who have learned the hard way that the world offers **promises that are empty.**

Let us show them the tomb of Jesus. For there they will find emptiness that is full of promise.

Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**