

## Peterborough Diocesan Synod, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2010



### **“Christians should stand up and be counted”**

*An edited version of Bishop Donald’s Presidential Address*

**Bishop Donald began by paying tribute to Bishop Frank’s work in the diocese. He said that the next Bishop of Brixworth would not have special responsibility for the Northampton Archdeaconry “but assist me across the diocese. We will share out the work but not on any geographical basis.”**

**But the new bishop would have one distinctive task: he will be given a key strategic role in formulating and implementing a much-needed strategy for growth. Bishop Donald developed this theme in the rest of his address.**

Once again our latest statistics have shown a decrease in the average Sunday attendance for both adults and children. Not only is this unsustainable: much more importantly it dishonours God. We will do all we can to reverse the decline. This will not be easy and some of the measures we have to take will almost certainly be unpopular or be seen by some as unfair.

I am thinking very hard with my senior staff and others about both a strategy and also particular steps that may need to be taken to turn us into the sort of church we are meant to be. My first conviction is that we need more clergy and that we need to help them to focus on growing the church numerically as well as in depth of discipleship. I want to stress discipleship next year. I will be speaking about this to the clergy next month, and will be involved in a number of teaching events under the heading of discipleship next year. Please pray that God will grow his church in this diocese.

In recent years it has been hard to stand up and be counted as a Christian in this country. The church has lost some of its confidence. We need to work to restore that. In this context I think the Pope’s recent visit to this country was a great success and good for the whole Christian Church. I’m not convinced that the beatification of Cardinal Newman made sense: either the system of beatification in general or the choice of Newman in particular.

But apart from that there is very much we should be thankful for: particularly the Pope’s insistence on the place of religion in the public square, the opportunities Archbishop Rowan had and took so well to insist on the rightful place of Christianity in our national life, and the way that the Prime Minister and most of the media accepted the challenge to allow faith back into public discourse. I believe that the visit made it easier for ordinary Christians to stand up and be counted, and that this will prove to be a significant turning point for Christianity in our land.

I am not one for wearing wristbands or badges with slogans. I didn't get onto the *What would Jesus Do* or the *Make Poverty History* bandwagons. But a campaign has recently been launched which I do want to support and commend. Entitled *Not Ashamed* it encourages Christians to stand up and be counted. Romans 1:16 says "I am not ashamed of the gospel" and 2 Timothy 1:12 says "I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust". There are also verses in Hebrews which tell us that God is not ashamed of us – those are worth pondering.

The Not Ashamed campaign is running through this autumn and Advent, with a Not Ashamed day on 1 December. There are wrist bands, badges, T shirts and baseball caps all carrying the simple logo of a cross within a speech bubble. I am wearing one of the badges now and warmly commend this idea. You can find more details on the Not Ashamed website [[www.ccfon.org](http://www.ccfon.org)]. It seems to me in our current climate that the more we can do to demonstrate our faith the better.

Of course wearing a cross and making it plain that we are believers is costly. I am reminded of the senior priest who said to me that he couldn't ever display a fish or a cross on the back of his car because his speeding and generally bad driving would bring Christianity into disrepute! If we are to "come out" more as Christians we may have to change our behaviour in some ways – that might be no bad thing.

And if you don't like the Not Ashamed merchandise please don't moan about it: just wear a cross or another distinctive Christian symbol, and be ready to stand up publicly for Christ. We need to do this, not least to encourage one another, to put the confidence back into our Christianity.

One of the ways we may well need to stand up as Christians over the coming months is in the debate about cuts in public spending. We should certainly be commending the government for the decision to protect the overseas aid budget. That was brave and good.

On the same basis we need to argue and campaign to ensure that the weakest and most vulnerable in our society are hit least hard by the inevitable cuts. That means those who are comfortable being willing to accept a harder hit. I know there are complicated economic forces at work here, and I am certainly not saying that the whole welfare state should be left as it is, or that the overall level of benefits should stay as high as it is. What I insist on, and we should all insist on, is that the genuinely poor, the weak and the vulnerable, should be properly cared for whatever the cost. That is a fundamental mark of a civilised society.

[www.peterborough-diocese.org.uk](http://www.peterborough-diocese.org.uk)