**[Slide 1**]Good morning! It is so good to be with you our bright, shiny, newly minted and newly elected diocesan synod. Thank you for having taken the decision to be part of this group and to offer your leadership into the life of our diocese. It is so good that you are here.

We have had quite a week. In the light of this we’ve taken a rather late in the day decision to rejig our agenda slightly. It’s important that I speak to you about the Makin review and the decision of Archbishop Justin to resign. I need too to add my contribution to setting the scene for this new synod. I’m also due this morning to speak about the development of diocesan strategy. Rather than speak about those things on three separate occasions today, I’d like to cover them all in just one address. I hope this is OK with you.

**[Slide 2**] All of us have been deeply shocked by the Makin Review. I’ve made a number of statements about this and have also sent out a video to parishes for safeguarding Sunday. I can’t assume that everyone will have seen this, so please let me repeat to you the message I’ve sent out to our diocese. I’ve said this:

This year Safeguarding Sunday comes after the publication of the deeply shocking and disturbing Makin Report into the appalling abuse perpetrated by the late John Smyth and the failure by the Church and other institutions to follow up effectively when informed about his actions, prevent further abuse and bring Smyth to justice.

My heart is with everyone in this country and in Africa who experienced the appalling abuse that took place. I recognise the weight of the dreadful actions they endured and the immense courage they have displayed in coming forward. The details revealed in the report highlight issues that cannot be ignored. This has only been emphasised by the decision of the Archbishop of Canterbury to offer his resignation in response to the report’s findings.

While our thoughts and prayers today should be with all those who have suffered through the failings of the past, I do want to acknowledge and thank everyone who is working across our diocese to make our churches a safe place for all today.  A statement issued by some of the survivors of Smyth included these words: ‘We want to make it clear that it remains our belief that in many, but not all, dioceses up and down the country, there is much excellent local safeguarding work going on.’ So I want to thank everyone here in Bath and Wells who is committed to making our churches safer – our parish safeguarding officers, churchwardens, clergy, Readers and other lay ministers, our diocesan safeguarding team and the many others who have taken on board that safeguarding is the responsibility of each and every one of us.

Creating a culture of safeguarding requires our collective commitment. All of us must all undertake the safeguarding training appropriate for any role we may in the church. It is our policy that all our churches need to be monitoring their safeguarding progress by using the safeguarding dashboards. If your church isn’t yet using these please contact our safeguarding team to get you onto the system.  Above all we want to be a learning diocese that’s continually improving our practice. To help us in this I’m so looking forward to our safeguarding being independently audited next April. If you’re asked to participate in any way in this, please engage as fully and as promptly as you can so that we can make the most of this opportunity to improve our safeguarding practices and become truly a safe place for all.

Hospitality lies at the heart of the Gospel. We can only exercise that hospitality if our churches are places that are evidently safe to come to. Thank you for all you are doing to enable us together to be a safer church.

We have to start with being safe. Out of that we can get on with the mission and ministry that we’re called to engage with. I realise that some of you may have served on diocesan synod for many years. For others this may be your first time. As we begin this new triennium together, I thought it best to start at the very beginning and to share with you my understanding of what a diocesan synod is for. [**Slide 3**]

How we do things is just as important as what we do. I invite us all to think about how this synod can be a place that plays a critical role in enabling us to set the culture of our diocese – a place where honest conversations can happen, deep listening take place, the views and understanding of our churches and the communities we serve be heard. It’s essential that our synod should not be a place that simply receives information. I ask you all to see synod as a place of co-creation – where together we work to identify God’s preferred future for us all and then seek to figure our how we can work together to get behind what God is asking of us and join in.

[**Slide 4**] So what is the overall vision of our diocese and how are we turning that into action? I apologise if you’ve heard all this before but I think it’s essential as we begin our time together that we all start on the same page.

Our diocesan vision is this [**Slide 5]**:

In response to God’s immense love for us, we seek to be God’s people, living and telling the story of Jesus.

[**Slide 6**] Last year we consulted people across our diocese, inviting them to respond to the question ‘What will help us live out our vision, and what difference will that make?’ Two aspirations emerged. These were for us to be a growing church that is transforming our communities.

The really good news is that we’re by no means starting from scratch. We’re working with a momentum and direction that’s already happening. Let’s start with being a growing church.

[**Slide 7**] Look at these figures about average weekly attendance at our churches during the last few years. As you’ll see, the story until the pandemic hit was a slow decline, year on year, followed by a very severe decline when our churches were all shut. But look at what has happened since. Each year for the last three years we have seen gradual recovery. We don’t think this consists of people who used to come to church before the pandemic but who are now coming back. Our sense is that what we’re seeing is new people coming to church. Across our diocese I keep on hearing stories of new people turning up at churches, joining Alpha Courses, wanting to get involved. All this is reflected in that next Saturday we shall be confirming 120 candidates in our cathedral. God is on the move. Our call is to join in. So my challenge is this. [**Slide 8**] I’m challenging each of benefices to plan intentionally to grow by one child (net) and by one adult (net) next year, the year after, and every year. This would maintain the upward trajectory we’ve seen since 2020 and it would change our lives. Will you take up this challenge?

The second aspiration that was voiced by people around our diocese was that we should seek to transform our communities. This is what we excel at. Choosing examples is a bit like asking a parent to say which of their children is their favourite. So let me share just a few of the stories that have taken my breath away during the last few months. [**Call on slides 9-12 in turn – Modern Slavery, RNLI, Holiday Club, Portishead Eco Art**] These are just a snapshot of all that’s taking place. Our challenge is to keep on building partnerships with those around us to develop and continue the excellent work that’s happening. Please can I particularly commend the ‘Growing Good’ work that we’re undertaking in partnership with the Church Urban Fund [**Slide 13**] (And don’t worry they’re not just urban – we took them to the Quantocks). Using Growing Good is proving to be one of the most effective ways that we can think and act to shape this work.

So where do we need to head next during the three years that this synod will serv?. How are we to take our aspirations to grow our churches and transform our communities and turn them into concrete actions implemented where you are in the communities your churches serve?

We have to start with prayer. Prayer of the kind we saw earlier this autumn in the wave of prayer that took place around our diocese [**Slide 14**] and which saw us coming together to pray, ask God to bless us in our work in all kinds of contexts – at youth events and in a cattle ring, in local churches and schools, in environmental projects. There were many powerful moments during this day. One that particularly stood out for me was when we were in the cattle market near Bridgwater and people prayed out loud from the heart prayers that were meaningful, poignant, urgent for their local churches and communities.

[**Slide 15**] We have also identified four strands to our work that we think will enable us to grow our churches and transform our communities:

* **[Slide 16]** Value, cherish and develop the people and resources already have.
* **[Slide 17]** Develop new worshipping communities alongside our existing offers
* **[Slide 18]** Share in ministry and leadership
* **[Slide 19]** Deepen and grow our faith

Our immediate challenge is how to start with what we have, not by worrying about what we lack, and by having the right conversations in the right places that can help us see where great practice is already happening, where new opportunities are present and possibilities can be opened up.

To help us in this we have established in the last few months a process of deanery reviews [**Slide 20**]. This is seeing our archdeacons and members of our diocesan support services team work alongside area and lay deans to review all the data that different deaneries have about their lives – about mission and ministry, fundraising and finances, the lot. The visits so far have been illuminating, informing and inspirational. Do talk to your area or lay dean about what’s involved and about all that’s being learnt through this process.

We’re also changing the pattern of how clergy ministry development reviews are taking place. From next year we shall be holding these in the context of an extended visit to benefices made by either one of the bishops or one of the archdeacons – to talk and think about implementing our priorities not only with our clergy but alongside everyone that makes up our churches – Readers and churchwardens, lay worship assistants and treasurers, parish safeguarding officers, members of congregations and people at local schools. Our aim is that this means that every benefice will receive such a visit every two years. So for example, I was in Bournville in Weston last Sunday and Monday. It was fab.

I’m very conscious of course that how the life of our diocese is financed is a pressing question for us all. As we’ve seen in the purposes of what a diocesan synod is for, this needs to be a major consideration for our work. So where are we up to and what needs to happen?

Where we’re up to is that in common with churches up and down the country, our parishes have on average sustained a major decline in their income during the pandemic and in the years that have followed. That’s before we’ve been hit by the inflation of the last year. This has affected everything we want to do – from employing youth and children’s workers to paying our heating bills, to maintaining and developing our buildings to implementing the kind of social action and generosity we’d all like to engage in. It has also reduced parishes’ ability to contribute towards our Common Fund. As a result, the diocesan budget has been in deficit to the tune of about £2 million per annum in recent years, a deficit that has been met by selling off diocesan assets which will eventually run out. In recent years diocesan budgets have been passed with the hope that things would somehow get better. They haven’t and I don’t believe that just repeating what we’ve done before is going to change matters. The challenge for all of us will be to address this situation – something that we shall be thinking about extensively in 2025. So what might be some elements of our response? [**Slide 21**]

Our starting point must be to think afresh about how to support the income of our parishes. This is the focus of our giving and fundraising team who are working with deaneries and parishes to enable them to have the funds to undertake the mission and ministry they understand God calling them to do. So for example in February, I’m looking forward to us gathering together as many of our licensed clergy as possible in order for us to learn from each other, discuss our challenges and find ways forward.

This year an enormous amount of consultation went into the development of our new system for collection of Common Fund which is coming into operation in 2025. This is undoubtedly going to be a challenge. But it’s also going to enable us to have a clear understanding that our old system simply didn’t give about the costs of our diocese and the contributions needed to enable those to be met. Please keep on remembering that when challenges come, none of us is alone. When difficulties arise, a host of help is available from our archdeacons, the giving and fundraising team and many other sources. Please do call on this help when there is need.

The new Common Fund arrangements are going to help us considerably in thinking about our diocesan budget. How much does ministry actually cost? How can we work together mutually to ensure that ministry and outreach happen in our materially poorest communities? What support services do we have to have and which do we want to prioritise? To enable us to think about all these questions and more, we will be running widescale consultations in 2025 to think about the diocesan budget and of how it should be constructed. We’re looking forward to all the wisdom that you will bring to this and to your encouraging a conversation to take place right across our diocese.

As I spend time with PCCs and church members, an issue that’s often drawn to my attention is the cost and challenge of maintaining our church buildings – among the most precious assets that we have. As a diocese, we don’t currently have an articulated buildings strategy. This is something that we shall also be working on next year and bringing to you for your input.

The person who is not with us today is our much beloved former chair of our diocesan board of finance, Ian Theodoreson, whose funeral takes place next Saturday. I want to pay tribute to all the wisdom and understanding that Ian brought to us, the example of his Christian character and courage and all the faith that shone from Ian in everything that he did. I’m delighted to let you know that Bishop’s Council approved on Thursday the appointment of Ian’s successor, Mrs Elizabeth Renshaw-Ames who will be introduced to synod in the new year.

This is our direction of travel. And I so look forward to all you will bring as we consider how to move forward together. And that’s before all the other issues where your views, your input, you rinsights will be needed too. Other issues that will be on our agenda will be the ongoing discussion about LLF [**Slide 22**], potentially the legalisation of assisted suicide [**Slide 23**] and many other topics too. If you have matters that you’d like to see on our agenda please don’t be backwards in coming forwards.

Thank you for all you are going to give during these next three years. As has already been discussed today in your house meetings, please do get involved as much as you can. Please think about whether you might like to stand for one of the Boards and Committees of our Synod where so much of the detailed work gets done [**Slide 224** – in bishop’s council, the diocesan board of finance, the board of patronage and so on. [**Slide 25**] But for now thank you for being here. Thank you for being with us today. And may God be with us in all that lies ahead. Thank you.