

**BISHOP'S CHARGE TO THE 64TH ANNUAL
SESSION OF THE DIOCESE OF KURUNAGALA,
CHURCH OF CEYLON 2019/29**

A. Pastoral Message

"I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every-way with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 'Corinthians 1:4-9)

Dear members of the council welcome to the 64th Annual session of the Diocese of Kurunagala. It is the time of the year we recall and recollect this past year and we look forward to the New Year. What we endured in the past few months, we would never have imagined at the end of the last annual session held roughly around this time. We were recovering from the deadly attacks that have rocked our nation and then this year we were confronted with a crisis which we have not expected. It is the covid-19 pandemic still affecting the world as we speak and the many nations including us that were hit hardly in all aspects of life.

It is with great joy that we welcome into our midst Rev. N. Arulnathan the Principal of the Theological College of Lanka Pilimatalawa as the chief guest for this year's conference. Rev. Arul is a senior minister of the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka and has served in many regions of the country. He has also completed his higher studies abroad and finally in South Africa. His specialization

is Diaconal Ministry and Administration related topics. Rev. Arul we are happy to have you at this prestigious event and we look forward to hear from you. We remember your ministry and the TCL in our prayers.

St Paul uses his epistles always in the task of encouragement. These beautiful words resonate his genuine compassion towards all those whom he knew well. During this crisis we came together and we realized how much our community, family, the church and the society needed each other's comfort and care. We also thanked God every time we knew that God's grace was sufficient for all of us and all those whom we cared for. We ourselves observed how we were enriched with the gifts of the Spirit as we took care of our budget and embraced a simple life style. We managed to help each other in crisis. We looked unto God with the new medium of communication. We kept in close contact with each and everyone who we knew need our prayers. This was not only Christian wish but which blanketed the whole of the country and even the world.

We were encouraged by how well we started treating our environment and how much we took responsibility with the awareness campaigns. We came together to help the most vulnerable and the weak. It is no secret that God enriched us during this time. While at times we felt powerless God 'keeps us firm to the end' making us reach for the best in humanity. The stories of courage and inspiration from all over the world are such as we have never heard before. We as individuals and as members of a fellowship must thank God that 'God is faithful' and even in calamity God's goodness shone through.

The crisis is by no means over. Even in the most sophisticated health care systems, it is taxing the people and especially the most

vulnerable. The world economy almost came to a standstill with travel, international trade and poverty taking its toll on countries. Still the mandatory regulations of awareness are still on at our workplaces, public places and in general. It is our concern that we must continue to follow the necessary instructions as Sri Lanka battles out this pandemic. Yet with the situation sustained around the world, our constant prayers are needed as people, marginalized communities, governments all seek answers in this time of conflict.

B. Country

Around this time of the year, in the past year, we were recovering from extremism that has crippled our land. At the political stages this has become more of a topic of political support rather than concern for the situation. With the power struggle between the executive and the legislative the situation worsened. The 'good governance' mandate was having a hard time staying afloat. This was indeed a period of anxiety as we believed the country has moved forward into a society of higher thinking, democracy and progressiveness. Yet the economic, social and other aspects of life were not addressed in full.

This also resulted in the heavy victory of the current president and of the Podujana Peramuna in the recent governmental elections. While we saw a return of populism we also expect that the country will be able to relieve the fears of the minorities and the communities which are still in the process of recovery. We wish the new government all the best and we hope to work with them at all levels. We encourage them to look at the many voices that are unheard in this country and who continue to struggle each day in their livelihoods. Especially we recall the farmers, plantation workers and daily labourers. These groups and many other

marginalized communities form the crux of our Diocese and our concern is for them.

We further hope that the government will continue to uphold the diversity of this country and respect each diversity. Mostly in the world populist philosophies lead countries into isolation and this must be avoided at all costs. As countries we all have reached a stage where we cannot survive alone but we need to collaborate with others. With world trade at a struggle it is necessary that the new government spends more energy and focus on self sufficiency and local productions. This will also encourage the local producers and the farmers.

We as a Diocese have welcomed the initiative of agricultural development and home gardening within our spheres. Also we intend to work closely with the government on educational issues that continue to worry us. The struggles of church schools taken over and the quotas that were accepted but not enforced continue to worry our congregations. It is our prayer that these genuine concerns will be addressed in the coming months and years ahead.

C. Diocese

Administration

The Diocesan management has been enhanced with committees and dialogue at all levels. We have put in place a leadership training programme that will come into effect in the coming years. This is because we realize that leadership also affects our mission, work, relationships and faith practice. We intend to train leaders at all levels giving importance to the practical aspect of the subject as well.

In financial and administration areas we have made much progress as we attempt to put in order our processes. With the support of our offices and the many who help us voluntarily we have been able to become a transparent and accountable entity that has received commendation from global partners. It is important to keep this trust in the future as well.

Pastoral Ministry

A most important aspect we have looked to into this year has been the 'lived out culture' of our Diocese. With the agricultural revolution with food security and self sufficiency we as a Diocese have looked back at our past. We realize that we are an agricultural diocese. We are blessed human, physical and skill resources. We also have institutions that live this culture in an agro setting. Especially in the past few months we have been able to observe the blooming of the agricultural ministry. We aim to develop this to our parishes as well as our congregations. This will be our unique contribution to the Church at large where we use agriculture as a basis for our spirituality, theologizing, reconciliation and lived out faith.

The past year also signals a time where we have had a special emphasis on our clergy and lay workers. We have aimed to develop their facilities and their opportunities. A number of them have received exposures local and foreign in their respective areas. We also initiated a Disciples of Kurunagala Fund where a certain amount of money will be funded to our workers on top of their stipend. We thank our donors across the world who helped us in this generous work.

We have also streamlined our ministry at the parish level to make sure that everyone in a parish is involved in mission. While

strengthening the work of the clergy through visits, pastoral care counsel and empowerment we also look at how well each Parish institution such as choir, youth, religious education etc. can make their ministries special with outreach.

Worship

In worship we have conducted several worships and have also, with the current time, looked at e-media as platform for mission. We see more meetings, services, messages, arts and literature coming into form through digitizing. We have made it a point to inculcate this trend into our mission and communication as well.

We are in the process of developing our communication aspect with the upgrading our website, media and publications. With publications we are able to reach a wider audience that will embrace our uniqueness. Already we have collaborated with partners for theological and lay education in this regard.

Proclamation

As our Diocese celebrated 70 years in the past year, we must look back at how well we have proclaimed our faith in context. The Diocese's emphasis has always been gospel in culture. Our previous Bishop made this very clear where we used arts and culture to symbolize our faith. All our institutions work at this goal where we use our own resources to build faith in context. The parish church in Pathragala is an excellent example for this school of thought. We were grateful for the many who assisted to build this church and its community in the past year.

Being a diocese entangled in multiculturalism we are ever enriched with the faiths and cultures of the people who surround us. Their effort in faith has made us 'contextualize' our mission and

proclamation. Whether it be the macro level voicing against injustice or efforts in a small way we still continue to harness this ideology through our work. This also means that we emphasis on ecumenism as well as our identity as the Church of Ceylon.

Much work has been done on the concept of identity in our publications and practice. It is evident that social identity plays a crucial role in the global village. Therefore while cherishing our identity we also realize that we are part of a larger scheme in the mission of this country.

D. Gratitude

With the current crisis affecting our life as a Church, we are indeed in much debt to thank God for the recovery we are now experiencing. We believe the past year even though with challenges was an effective year of ministry. We are indeed grateful for many well-wishers around the world and around the country who pray and assists us in our pilgrimage. Especially we thank those who assisted us in the relief efforts in numerous ways. We thank the many who have assisted us in the building of churches and in funding our daily ministries such as mission travel, repairs, day school programmes etc.

I thank our Archdeacon, Ven. George Melder who has assisted the Diocese in all these efforts and have worked tirelessly in making effective ministries across the Diocese. To the Diocesan Secretary, Mr. Lashantha Perera and Mr. Dinesh Jayawardana the registrar we thank them for their valuable services and we wish them well. We also thank all the members who voluntarily serve on all committees and for the many who take on special interests.

We are thankful for the Diocesan staff as well as for the many clergy and laity at different levels of management who have assisted the Diocese in varied capacities. I also thank the Bishop's office staff Mr. Vernon with Mr. Banda and Mr. Raju and the Bishop Lakshman Wickremasinghe Centre staff for their enduring support. I also thank my family Arlene, Sethlath and Sethsara for their encouragement at all times.

Few months ago we were uncertain of many matters relating to our faith journey. Yet we are now here ready to proceed into the future with hope. We do not- plan for the future based on our own needs but as we think fit as God calls us to do so. Even though the road ahead in recovery can be difficult in the midst of the crisis; we are assured that our faith journey can never be halted. We are called to be the light that shines in any darkness.

May God guide this council and our Diocese as we proceed into the future.

+ *Keerthi Kurunagala*

The Bishop of Kurunagala