

Letter from Bishop Stephen Wright to the People of God in the Hexham and Newcastle Diocese

14th June 2023

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I hope you will accept this first way of speaking with you as your new Bishop. I have chosen my first public statement to be a letter of introduction to all the people in our diocesan family. Given recent events, forgive me, it is longer than would be ideal.

I am Bishop Stephen Wright; I prefer to be called “Bishop Stephen” if that is okay with you. I am an Assistant Bishop in the Archdiocese of Birmingham, ordained on the 9th October 2020. There is an attached personal history to this letter that gives more details of my background, but I have left off some important stuff, like supporting West Bromwich Albion, and no, I will not be changing that when I move to be with you in July!

“*My grace is enough for you*” (2 Cor 12:9) were the words of Scripture that I prayed most about when I was first appointed a Bishop. Those comforting words of St Paul reflecting on his own weaknesses have been in my heart and mind again, as I accept the Lord’s call to serve you. I confess to being somewhat daunted. The ministry of a diocesan Bishop is onerous. I will be serving in an area I am not familiar with, and I am painfully aware that you have suffered hurt and shock in recent months. I will make some comments about that later. But I trust that God’s grace is indeed enough for us all when we accept it into our hearts and minds, co-operate with it and through it, serve. The Lord sends us all out to be his missionary disciples, to serve as he served. Please, your prayers are a powerful part of that grace. Please pray for the whole diocesan family every day. Please pray for me each day as I will pray for you all.

A Bishop is called to care for the People of God entrusted to him like Christ the Good Shepherd. My first acts are to listen to you, to learn from you and discern with the whole diocesan family how we worship the Lord and serve in our local communities. I look forward with joy to meeting you all in the weeks and months ahead as I see firsthand how the grace of God is alive in our parishes, our schools, our religious and lay communities, our youth ministry, our Caritas work, and in all the many ministries and communities across the Diocese. We must discern together how the Holy Spirit is calling us to be a synodal Church. I look forward to meeting and working with our sisters and brothers of other Christian traditions, of other faiths and none and the wider society here in the North-East.

My heart and mind will always be a Parish Priest. It is the best job in the world. Please pray for vocations, especially to the priesthood. As a Parish Priest you stand with your people day in and day out. You have the joy of serving them in their joys and the humbling privilege of serving them in their sadness too. You meet saints every day and you find you are ministered to more than you can ever minister. In recent years I have been learning to adjust to being an Assistant Bishop. Although this ministry is different with other burdens and joys, I am delighted that at its heart a Bishop’s ministry is like that of a Parish Priest; to stand with your people, to know them and serve them. Do not lord it over them. In November 2021, Pope Francis preached, “*Blessed is the Bishop who considers his ministry a service and not a power, making meekness his strength, giving to all the right of citizenship in his own heart, so as to inhabit the land promised to the meek.*” Please, pray that I will be faithful to that call to serve you.

I wish I could end the letter here, but it would be wrong for me not to say some words about the distress caused to you all and others in recent months. My words can only be initial comments. It is important in safeguarding and leadership that there is clarity as to who has responsibilities. Until I am installed as your Bishop, most probably later in mid-July, Archbishop Malcolm remains the Apostolic Administrator with full responsibility. In this time of hand-over as well as learning about the joys and blessings in our Diocese, I will be learning more about the troubling history and the ways the Diocese needs to respond to this history so that I can take on my responsibilities, working with you all in the Diocese. I

have read the very recent CSSA report. At present it is for Archbishop Malcolm and the Diocesan Trustees to respond to it. I am committed to respond to all the recommendations and areas for development in due course. I thank the CSSA and all who participated in the report.

If I may share some of my principles in ministering as a Priest and as a Bishop, which touch on recent history. People working with children or adults in vulnerable situations must have the welfare of the child or adult as their paramount concern. That principle applies across all areas of safeguarding. As your Bishop it is essential that I model best practice in safeguarding matters in my personal conduct and by following the national safeguarding policies. I welcome the diocesan safeguarding team and committee and the CSSA holding me to account in all the safeguarding work I am involved in. I will follow their expert informed advice. If I ever seek clarifications on advice I will do so in a transparent and auditable manner. I find it highly improbable I would not follow informed advice because I would be saying that the advice is irrational or does not follow national policies. I do not see that situation ever arising. All clergy and other relevant appointments will be made by me after consultation with the safeguarding team and after any advice is received.

The crime of child abuse images must never be downplayed. Every image is a grotesque evil act on an innocent child. Words fail to grasp the horror of the crime suffered by the innocent and the damage it causes them. To view such images for motives other than to investigate and stop abuse and help the victim is to condone and participate in evil acts. In recent years I have met with victim/survivors of abuse and their families. I am committed to continue to meet, to listen and learn, and offer what care we can. I recognise my need for ongoing training in this pastoral area.

The Church will always minister to all people. In the case of registered sex offenders and other serious offenders, the minister, the manner, and the location of the pastoral care must be appropriate and carefully managed. This is to protect the vulnerable, the minister himself, and to avoid scandal. Recent history shows how this has failed. As your Bishop, I will not enter pastoral ministries or social friendships that will compromise my commitment to best safeguarding practice. It is important that appropriate boundaries are maintained and never confused about who offers pastoral care, upon what motives or basis it is offered and where and when it takes place. To borrow a legal phrase, safeguarding must be done and must be seen to be done.

I acknowledge the concerns about the purchase of the Bishop's House in 2020. I have not seen it yet and I am grateful I have a house to move to. Many people do not have homes. I must move in a short space of time, so I will be moving into the present Bishop's House. I will then have to make informed decisions about my living and working arrangements, recognising that other people work in that house too. This will take some time and I have initially set myself two years for that discernment. I hope you understand the reasons behind this decision.

Please forgive the length of this letter. I accept Pope Francis' appointment with joy, albeit a nervous joy at present. I look forward to being at home here with you soon and serving you. Southerner though I may be, in my free time I look forward to exploring the beauty of the area of the diocese and learning about its history. As a bird watcher and a person who suffers with the heat, I can hardly complain about moving north to live. Please keep me in your prayers as you are in mine.

Our Lady, pray for us. St Cuthbert, pray for us.

With prayers and blessings,

+ Stephen