

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
To the People of God – To the Laos
June 2009

Dear People of God

As some parts of our Province are celebrating Youth Day this month, let me devote this letter to the subject of children and young people. Though I bear the responsibilities of an Archbishop towards them, I am also writing as a parent, the father of a 14 year old boy, and a 9 year old girl, and much of what I want to say applies primarily to parents – though I hope that it will also speak to everyone else within the wider family of the church, among whom our young people grow up.

God has a very special place for children in his heart. We know this from Jesus, who rebuked the disciples when they tried to keep parents from bringing their little children to meet Jesus (Mk 10:13-16). Jesus has as much time, as much love, for every human person, no matter how old or how young (and the same applies to those who are differently abled). We are all special.

'Let them come to me' he says, pointing us to what matters most about how we raise children: bringing them up to enjoy and develop a relationship with Jesus, as friend, as Lord, as Saviour. No child is too small to begin to know God's love and care for them, which is why Anglicans baptise the children of our church families – just as Paul baptised the family of the jailer in Philippi (Acts 16:33).

We do this, as the Prayer Book service says, 'on the understanding that they will be brought up as Christians within the family of the Church.' To promise this means far more than merely teaching them about God, about the Christian faith – it means both showing them and helping them to live it. When I taught my daughter to ride a bike, I did not sit her down and instruct her in the theory of cycling. No, I showed her myself, and then spent many hours explaining and encouraging, pushing the bike with her on it, until she got the hang of it for herself.

When the Old and New Testaments speak of teaching, what is in mind is generally far closer to what today we might call modelling and mentoring. At the heart of this letter, then, is my prayer, my plea to parents, and all who guide children and young people: that you will see yourselves in this light, and intentionally pursue a lifestyle that models the best of the Christian life and that mentors and coaches young people as they learn to live it for themselves. This is most of all the responsibility of parents, and should not be left to clergy, confirmation classes or school teachers.

The Catechism in the Prayer Book gives excellent teaching about what Christians believe (and I commend it for regular reading for everyone! It is on p.423). But our faith is far more than statements of belief, or even a set of rules about behaviour. It is a way of life, the best and most fulfilling life that we could ever ask for, the only life that helps us to deal with the challenges that come our way, and the ultimate questions of human fallibility (sin) and human mortality (death). We need to help young people learn how to apply God's eternal truths to the actual contexts of their lives today – we are not teaching them to live in ways appropriate to when we were kids! The Confirmation Service speaks of growing in a life of 'worship, witness and service'; and in our families, as well as through the structures of Province, Dioceses and parishes, we must ensure that we are directing our efforts relevantly to helping our young people live such a life for today.

The Old Testament tells the ancient Hebrews to speak to their children what it means to be the people of God – both the commandments, and the story of how he called and rescued them, and all he has done for them – and says 'teach them, talking about them when you are at home, and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up' (Deut 11:19). Faith is not just for the Sabbath, for Sundays – it is for the whole of life, for every part of our daily lives.

Perhaps you worry that you are not a very good example, and don't know how to mentor. Do not be discouraged! For God does not just leave us to get on with the task – he

is model and mentor to us! Jesus is our model, and as we heed his call to 'follow me', he will help us to walk in his Way, know his Truth, live his Life. And the Holy Spirit is our mentor, alongside us, guiding and encouraging us like the best possible coach or trainer, as we might say with less than a year to go to the football World Cup! And in turn, we should help our youth to follow Jesus, and to hear and respond to the Spirit's leading, for themselves.

'Leadership development' is another way of talking about what we must do. And we are not only investing in leaders for the future. Studies show that friends of their own age are often the most significant influence in young people's lives – so we are performing an important task for today if we enable our own children and teenagers to be 'peer educators', models and mentors for all that is best in life, among their own age group.

Because every Christian is fully a member of the body of Christ, and 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (1 Cor 12:7) we can expect young people to bring a contribution from God to the life of the Church. St Paul wrote to Timothy 'let no-one despise your youth' (1 Tim 4:12). We must allow young Christians to participate fully – with support that is sensitive. Remember, St Paul also wrote 'Parents, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord!' (Eph 6:4).

The Anglican Communion has an International Youth Network. At the recent Anglican Consultative Council meeting, we proposed that each Province should have an annual 'Ministries with Young People Sunday' with a special offering to support the churches' activities with the youth. We shall be discussing this and other ways of promoting the life of faith among our young people. Another priority is appointing chaplains to universities and tertiary institutions.

Let us all, whether or not we are parents or others who model and mentor the life of faith, pray regularly for our young people, remembering that unless we too become as little children, we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:3).

Finally, congratulations to the Diocese of Mpumalanga on their fifth birthday! I was privileged to join the celebrations, and to feel there a sense of the energy of Joshua, another young man called to great leadership. There was such a great vibrancy, not only among the young people, but in everyone, reflecting the glorious beauty of flourishing creation all around!

Yours in the service of Christ,

+Thabo Cape Town