

The Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf

Province of the Episcopal Church in
Jerusalem and the Middle East



The Right Reverend Sean Semple

Sixth Bishop of the Diocese of
Cyprus and the Gulf

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

*Thus says the Lord...I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.¹*

The first anniversary of my consecration and installation as Bishop of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf was marked by a joyful celebration of new beginnings in ministry with the ordination of the Reverend Maria Evangelou to serve as a Deacon at the Cathedral of St Paul's in Nicosia, and the collation of the Venerable Paul Carr as Archdeacon in Cyprus.

We are all aware of the geographic extent and complexity of our Diocese and, as promised, I have spent the last year visiting, listening and learning.

It is clear that God has called me to serve here at a pivotal time in the history of the Diocese—a time when the prevailing mood is for reform and change.

Over its 49-year history, the ten countries that the Diocese serves have transformed, and we are called to ensure that the churches and structures of the Diocese reflect God's work in those places.

The Gulf increasingly assumes a central role in global politics and economics, drawing growing numbers of Christians to the region. An estimated 5 million Christians work in the Gulf, mainly from the Indian subcontinent, Africa and Southeast Asia.²

The demographics of our region are reflected in our distinctly international Diocese. We are unique in our Province, in that the majority of our people—with the notable exception of the Anglican faithful in Iraq—are not indigenous Christians. Some of our congregations may reflect a particular linguistic and cultural focus, such as our Tamil, Urdu and Mandarin congregations, but the majority consist of a glorious diversity of nationalities, cultures and traditions. It is in such churches that we grow in our understanding of people from places we might have known little about before coming to this Diocese; discover how diverse the family of God really is; and recognise the holy gift of loving care—for and of a neighbour.³

Our Gulf Archdeaconry accounts for the majority of parishes in the Diocese, several of which are particular powerhouses of spirituality, of ministry and, indeed, of financial growth. It is right that our Diocesan strategy, structures and representation should reflect the significance of the Gulf in a process of reform based on discernment and reflection—a process currently undertaken by the Synod-mandated Bishop's Task Force.

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¹ Isaiah 43.19

² Gulf Churches Fellowship, January 2025

³ Luke 10.25-37

We need to be a Diocese that is planning for mission and growth. As Gulf countries continue to develop, there is recognition of the need to ensure spiritual provision for a growing number of Christian workers, at a time when some of our existing church buildings are already operating at full capacity, and where programmes of church planting are called for to meet emerging demand for spiritual sustenance in new areas.

In Cyprus, there are also growing parishes attracting international Christians. Our Anglican churches on this biblical island operate on a different scale to those in the Gulf but, as parish posts are renewed, we will be looking to recruit clergy who have a vision of reaching out and searching for God's children who have come to the island to study, work or retire.

And so we are now entering a phase of prayerful review and change in the Diocese—a reset that is being undertaken sensitively and systematically, with a true openness to the Holy Spirit. For we need to be directed by God's agenda, and not our own—sympathetic to those for whom change may seem bewildering or even threatening. Change must entail consultation, care and encouragement, introduced at a pace that is realistic and carries people with us. My continued commitment to strive to listen and learn throughout remains.

After a year serving as Bishop of this Diocese, I have come to realise how important it is to accept that we cannot have some things both ways: we cannot simultaneously have a scaled-down Diocesan infrastructure *and* the capacity to competently manage multiple complex and demanding projects. We rely on volunteers and those whose primary ministry lies elsewhere in order to deliver Diocesan projects. The speed of change may therefore be frustrating to some. But, grounded in an understanding that reform is under way, I believe that we can, with maturity and patience, successfully work together for the best of the Diocese.

The question I have been asked most frequently this year is, "What is your vision for the Diocese?" The prevalence of this question speaks to me of a yearning for direction. Yet I am always cautious in answering, because I believe that that vision must be God's vision, rather than that of any bishop—a vision discerned and held collectively by the laity and clergy. Again, I suggest that we are accomplishing this through the work of the Bishop's Task Force.

But, if I might offer a sense of my own hopes, it would be to see a Diocese that:

- *is structured and funded to meet the needs and challenges of ministry and mission in this context*
- *inspires its clergy and laity, to provide an enduring, stimulating and life-giving time in our Christian pilgrimage*
- *recognises its unique international identity in a Middle Eastern context*

While we might have experienced our Anglican faith in a particular way in the countries we have come from, we now hold this faith in a very particular theological and socio-political space.

We continue to celebrate the ministry of women in our Diocese, as we have since the Reverend Catherine Dawkins was ordained here in 2010.

And, in keeping with the 2023 Lent statement issued by the Diocese of Jerusalem on the Teaching of Christian Marriage and a statement subsequently circulated by my predecessor the Right Reverend Michael Lewis, I hereby reconfirm that the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf adheres to the Church's traditional teaching and practice on Christian marriage as being a lifelong union between a man and a woman, as detailed in the 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution I.10.

The positions we hold on these matters must, of course, on no account be weaponised to shame or diminish others; rather, with humility, grace and goodwill, they are to maintain the bond of peace amongst us.

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It is one of the subtlest temptations that in our preoccupation with parish and diocesan matters we might be distracted from the “one necessary thing”,⁴ our devotion to Christ.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, we seek “a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert”. Direction and life. Please pray with me that our Diocese will experience both.

+Sean

Ascensiontide 2025

The Rt Revd Sean Semple

Bishop in Cyprus and the Gulf

⁴ Luke 10.41

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