



# *Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador*

## *The Anglican Church of Canada*

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### **Bishop's Fifth Pastoral Letter, January 2015**

#### **Our Church and Community**

Dear Friends,

This is my fifth such letter to the Diocese this year following our Diocesan Synod in May of 2014. As before, my words in this letter will echo themes identified at Synod. Today I discuss **Our Church and Community**.

In Newfoundland and Labrador today the next most likely social grouping for people to belong to beyond their own family is most probably a faith community. Although the type and quality of that membership varies from person to person, we continue to be a people who generally belong to a church in addition to our own family. In my own study of the Anglican Church in Newfoundland and Labrador I have argued for a long time that there are really two discernable patterns of membership: the active and core members, and the passive and fringe members. Both (broad!) definitions include people who really do consider themselves members, although the way in which they live out that membership differs in ways that can be discerned and analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. I should know; I wrote a PhD dissertation on this. The simple realization of just how many of us still think of ourselves as belonging to a church should inspire us all to reflect upon our own roles in our church community and what it is we are really saying when we say "I am an Anglican." In this letter I will not review some of the statistical evidence for what I am writing but for those of you who want to do that please refer to my Address to Synod, the "State of the Union," that is available online from our diocesan website.

We are a people who value relationships immensely. In my opinion, having spent my entire life in the Anglican Church here, and well over half of that life in ordained ministry, the word that best expresses who we are is "relational." The energy that fuels us as a church can be found in the relationships that we form with each other in community and through that community with God. We are not a highly doctrinal or liturgical church, nor are we a church preoccupied with scriptural debates over morality. We are not a strongly clerical church because the laity has always had a strong and recognized role. We are a church that values relationships. I have said to the clergy on occasion that there are many things in ministry here that people will forgive. They will often forgive shortcomings in preaching and administration, or weaknesses in liturgy and theology. But they will generally not forgive us if we cannot form healthy, human and loving relationships with them. In short, in Newfoundland and Labrador, **relationships matter**.

The Anglican Church in this province is a community with a story but the nature of that community and that story is not always understood. I continue to receive e-mails and letters from people who insist on viewing our church through the lens of its past history and not as a living body. We are a community of faith whose story began in Christ long before we came along. In belonging to his church we are also saying that *his* story is *our* story as we seek to be a community in which others see Christ through us. We are a church animated by the Gospel and by that marvellous vision of the Kingdom of God Jesus presented. That is why in our worship we read sacred scripture to help us remember who we are and then we hear sermons to help us understand better what God is saying to our church. Our prayers and hymns all help us to be formed into what St. Paul rightly calls the “Body of Christ” in this world.

In my earlier presentation to Diocesan Synod I showed how strongly even the less-active members of our church avail of the church’s ministry at times of life transitions like baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals (The remainder of this paragraph is largely from that presentation). There is a retained identification with the church beyond the institutional boundaries among those who for whatever reason no longer appear on parish and diocesan rolls. The patterns shows that the church continues to have a role around key times of transition for them but not always an ongoing role in the ordinary and familiar rhythms of life. In my opinion, this indicates that the reservoir of goodwill toward the Anglican Church and the desire for the ministry of the church at times of deep significance in individual lives remains strong. The fact that there has not been decline in our key pastoral ministries speaks to a continuing connection with the church even among those who have chosen not to remain or become full and active members. There is much for our church to learn from knowing this group better. We may even discover that those who seemingly have turned their back on organized religion continue to believe at a deeper level that the church still contains the mystery of all that is good in human life. In terms of our community today, the most serious challenge facing us is that we have become a rapidly aging church with one, and possibly two, generations largely missing from our pews and from our lay church leadership. After years of steep decline, our official membership today is stable at around 33,000 persons but 70-80% of our core worshipping membership is composed of people 50 years of age and older (About 40% of the general population in NL is 50 years and older. Fully 60% of the province is younger than 50.). The 25 to 45-year-old age group with their children are hugely underrepresented in our active worshipping community.

Another concern I have for our church today is a tendency toward tribalism in our community life. Our primary social identification can sometimes be only the local community as we know it and want to remember it. It is good to belong but not good if that belonging prevents us from bridging with others and welcoming the stranger as God calls us to. There may be room for us to share what we have a little better at times. Some of us still think of our churches as “clubs” with membership requirements. I shudder every time I hear people speak of “paying their dues” to their church. There are no dues to belong to this church and even if there were they have already been paid by Christ on the Cross.

Much has been made in recent years about the role of religion in wider society. And while there are those who believe that religious communities should be further isolated and diminished in modern Western democracy, the truth is that faith communities enrich our common life immensely because of the way in which they bring ready-formed and deeply-networked communities into play. The sociologist, Robert Putnam, describes religious communities as “supercharged” in their [social capital] relationships and I believe him to be correct. Where there is reason for us to question faith communities it lies in the question of religious motivation. Religion, like most things, can be used in any number of ways. There are those who hijack the ideals of religious teachings to

their own end, while others live their religious faith in ways beneficial to themselves and to others. Here, I have found the work of Allport and Ross and their definition of religion as either “intrinsic” or “extrinsic” helpful. Essentially, they said that religion can be *lived* or it can be *used*. People are motivated differently in their religious life. Religion has always been about many different things, but one of the most important is community because faith has a way of generating community. As a local example, I refer to a study conducted by the Reverend Jolene Peters and me at the Parish of the Good Shepherd in Mount Pearl in 2012 during her internship, later presented and published in the UK as “Social and Spiritual Capital at Work through a Ministry of Hospitality: A Case Study in Newfoundland” (*Rural Theology*, Vol. 11 No. 2, November, 2013, 83-91). We looked at the hospitality ministry and discovered different motivations between those who served and those who came as guests. Both valued the church greatly but the servers were additionally motivated by religious values (the spiritual) while the guests were further motivated by the social values (the social). Both groups came together in community every week but for slightly different reasons. Sometimes the social side of religious life is more important than the religious side; sometimes it’s the other way around. But there can be little doubt that something happens within religious communities that is indeed greater than the individual members.

Newfoundland and Labrador remains distinct from the rest of Canada in many ways and retains many of the qualities of its past while adopting many of the best features of contemporary belief and culture. In religious matters, as in so much of Newfoundland and Labrador life, the most important qualities of the past have been preserved even as some features disappear and others are modified. Although some of the roles traditionally fulfilled by religion in health care and education have been taken over by the state the reality continues to be that for most of us here, our identity has been shaped deeply by notions of Christian charity and Christian piety. Churches, along with countless other voluntary associations and charities, occupy that space between government and the marketplace called civil society. We play an important role because of our independence from both the government and the marketplace. Healthy societies are characterized by a rich civil society of voluntary associations. I believe strongly in the active participation of religious communities and faith-based groups in the public sphere. We are the same people who pay taxes, give life to the economy, and who have chosen to remain in the province because of the quality of life that it offers us. Our faith communities have developed a network of relationships within themselves and with others that not only sustains them but enables them to contribute in lasting ways to the wider community. Indeed, volunteer organizations like churches shoulder many of the social responsibilities like food and clothing banks that governments, because of fiscal and administrative challenges, are often unable to administer. The state cannot meet every need its citizens might have and this is most evident around individual and collective searches for meaning, purpose and community.

I believe that some of the most important players in any social plan for Newfoundland and Labrador going forward are religious groups and communities. These groups not only add value to the discussion but also bring with them ready-made networks of volunteers and infrastructure that can enable governments to better reach communities and serve their people. When it comes to the type of community people most value, it is the local, the small-scale and the familiar that is most cherished. One of the best examples I can give of this is our own St. Luke’s Homes and the care it has provided for over half a century to those in need. The Anglican Church in this province was on board with affordable housing long before the term was ever popularized. One of the greatest values of religious communities today lies in their ability to speak effectively on behalf of those who are often marginalized by society and whose influence over the levers of power is weak. It is incumbent upon those holding public office to preserve and enhance local communities, religious and otherwise, in order to preserve a

vital human dimension to our common life here. The choice should not be between religion or no religion in the public sector but instead should centre on how government partners with all of its citizens – both secular and religious – for the common good.

I end with words from my address to Synod in May of 2014 where I spoke of the value of our Anglican faith and the importance of renewing and creating healthy, loving, fresh, and vibrant communities:

- Communities that make a difference in the lives of those who belong and also those who do not yet belong.
- Communities that leaven and flavor the world around them.
- Communities that draw others to them with the promise of acceptance and compassion and forgiveness and life and transformation.

My next such letter to you will be sent in February and will be called, Our Church and the Kingdom of God.

With my every blessing,

+*Geoff*