



# Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

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## Bishop's Pastoral Letter for September 2014

Dear Friends,

Today, I begin a series of eight letters to you on matters arising from and inspired by our Diocesan Synod this past May. These letters are not intended to be in any way binding upon you or our parishes but are intended to draw all of us into intelligent conversation on our relationship to one another as members of Christ's Body in the world. As much as anything I hope to ask "thoughtful questions" about our faith community. All such letters will be titled "**Our Church and ...**" and they will generally be in the form of short theological reflections (2000-3000 words) on our journey as God's People. I will leave it to each of you to decide how you wish to distribute and share my words. You are quite free not to share them with anyone in your parish if you so choose, although I do suggest synod delegates, vestry members and other congregational leaders as possible persons for inclusion. These letters will be posted on our diocesan website as they are written.

I invite responses to my words and would enjoy a healthy conversation around them as this year unfolds. They do reflect my considered opinion, however, I believe that opinion is an informed one that I am able to defend. I will write one such letter every month until April of 2015 on different topics. Nothing would make me happier than knowing that these letters in some way inspired lively debate and respectful discussion among our Clergy and Lay Leaders, encouraging healthy change if it is required for the betterment of our faith community. My first letter is called **Our Church and its Possessions**.

+*Geoff*

## Our Church and its Possessions

On July 2 of this year I was invited to share in a discussion on CBC Radio Crosstalk with Archbishop Martin Curry of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese entitled: "**Are there too many church buildings in this province? Is this a sign of the times?**" It was a very thought-provoking discussion and I found the callers stimulating and respectful. Both Archbishop Curry and I felt that the number of church buildings (and other properties!) the Anglican and Catholic Churches oversee today is a burden for us. We identified that the properties we currently own and manage reflect settlement patterns of the past rather than patterns of the present and the challenge of maintaining them in the face of declining populations in some areas and expanding populations in other areas is great. I have been thinking about the conversation ever since. My thoughts deepened this past weekend when I learned that the Roman Catholic Church announced the permanent closures of churches in Harbour Grace and Spaniard's Bay.

Although I have only been Bishop since January, I have spent all of my ordained life in this Diocese, serving both in Labrador and in Newfoundland, in rural settings and in urban settings. I feel I know this diocese well. Our Anglican Church in this province is a distinct part of the wider Anglican Communion with many features that are unique to us and reflect the way in which the Gospel has been received in this place. We are very much a "church of the local" that has always drawn near to the people who asked for its ministry. We are also a deeply pastoral church that inspires a rich relational ministry. In fact, I have long believed that the Anglican Church in Newfoundland and Labrador may best be defined by the word "relational" because of the way relationships both shape and energize our church. We are a church today that has been gifted with the work of many generations before us who understood well the nature of that local ministry and who ensured that they cared for their church – their most immediate point of contact with a worshipping community – to the best of their abilities.

The early patterns of settlement in Newfoundland and Labrador were largely determined by the fishery. People settled as closely as possible to suitable fishing grounds in many of the sheltered and habitable bays and coves along our vast shoreline. Road connections were not thought of and the primary method of transportation between those communities was by boat for hundreds of years. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century did roads come to most places, although far too late for hundreds of communities that were resettled in the second half of that century. Today, we find ourselves with a blended pattern of settlement with many of our people in small outports connected to larger communities by a system of roads and highways. Some communities have grown and prospered in recent years. Others have declined or disappeared. And while much of our Province has modernized, and consolidation has taken place in services and systems from education to health, the Anglican Church continues to work in historical patterns with churches almost everywhere. This presents us with a challenge today.

I encourage readers of this document to also read my address to Diocesan Synod in May 2014 ("*The State of the Union*," available online or at Synod Office) because here, as there, I view the life of our Church through the lens of its ministries. There are those today, in the media and elsewhere, who insist on seeing the Anglican Church as a relic of the past and historical curiosity or as a source of controversy with little interest in the living community we really are. Significantly (and I believe this to be very telling), there was almost no media coverage for either of the two new churches we opened

in 2014: the Church of St. Cyprian & St. Mary on Bell Island, and the Church of St. Michael & All Angels in St. John's. But churches no longer needed by our diocese in St. Philip's and Goulds continue to receive front-page coverage! I invite you to see your church as a living (and thriving!) community of believers and believers. We are a part of the fabric of this province and contribute greatly to the world around us. When you view your church through the lens of its ministries, all sorts of exciting things emerge into clear sight!

By my count our diocese has something well beyond 200 properties that it must maintain today. In fact there are so many properties that I cannot get an accurate count and the real number may be closer to 300! They include churches, rectories, parish halls, cemeteries, and glebe lands in and around St. John's. As for our cemeteries, these properties we must care for and maintain as part of our sacred trust with the past, but there is room today for us to reconsider our relationship with all of the other things we now possess. In some cases, the need for them has changed and the burden of carrying them is affecting other ministries. As I pointed out at Diocesan Synod, property and maintenance consume massive amounts of parish energies today, so much so, that in some places people have grown very tired and tell me they just don't know how much longer they can "keep things going." I meet people today whose primary purpose in their Christian life is to raise enough money to pay the bills on their church properties. Some have made the preservation and maintenance of their church building their primary Christian ministry. There has to be more to the Christian life than that!

The Christian journey must be about transformation and not simply the preservation of the past. In my presentation at Synod and I identified that for every \$100 spent on maintenance in our diocese today, merely \$16 is spent on ministry to children, youth and young families. And in fact only about .08% of parish and diocesan expenditures is directly for children, youth and young families. Judging by our budgets and expenditures, buildings and properties are far more important to us than some of our people. *And we are getting tired.* In fact, in some places, we have become a church drowning under the weight of buildings. In the absence of sustainable partnerships allowing us to sell or repurpose buildings it is time to look at reducing the number of properties we are responsible for, particularly where there are multiple buildings very close to each other. Obviously where considerable distance exists between churches we have to maintain buildings in multiple communities.

I have told the clergy that psychology does a much better job than theology of explaining much of this today. And part of that is a desire to return to a past that we remember as safe and ideal. Sometimes we even allow ourselves to believe that by keeping everything as closely as possible to the way we remember it we are serving God best. We may even want our future to look just like our remembered past, buildings and all. But when we do that we are not trusting God to lead us into new places with new energies and new ministries. Scripture tells us that our duty and work is to proclaim the Lord's death and resurrection until he comes again. If that is truly to be our main purpose, how well are we doing when the primary purpose of a congregation is to raise enough money to simply pay its bills with little time or energy for mission and ministry beyond? Scripture also tells us that all things are meant to one day pass away in God's time, including the Church. Our properties are tools for a greater purpose and not ends in themselves. I firmly believe that we must strive to integrate and intertwine our whole

life – our property *and* our ministry – into a single response to God’s love and the needs of God’s people.

As I said at Synod, we might even have to change the way we think of our church. Is it?

**Church = Building + Priest + Sunday Services**

... OR ...

**Church = Community + Faith + Discipleship**

In my opinion, our multitude of buildings and properties today are not only consuming too much of our time and energy, but are also standing in the way of new ministries and renewed communities. I was shocked to learn recently how many congregations no longer have any kind of ministry to children youth or young families. It’s not that there aren’t any of the above to be found, but they are scattered among so many congregations and communities that there aren’t enough of them in any one place to make the ministry effective. We have too many church properties that are one-hour per week facilities with no use outside of that other than occasional funerals and weddings. Do we really need all of the church buildings and parish halls we currently have if they make it impossible for our people to come together in new and more faithful ways? When vestries and parish councils redefine themselves as “property committees” with little or no focus on ministry and outreach something has gone terribly wrong.

But there is reason to hope. I am inspired by the rich and life-giving ministries of outreach and hospitality I see blossoming in many churches today. I used to teach a course on Christian Leadership where I asked the students to listen to two songs in class (No, I didn’t sing!): one song was “*Stayin’ Alive*” by the BeeGees and the other was “*What a Beautiful World*” by Louis Armstrong. I told the students they are the two songs of our church and that parishes will typically select one or the other because they either choose to maintain and survive or they choose to dream and grow. The job of Christian Leaders was to help parishes choose the latter. My heart will sing for joy the first time a parish wants to discuss converting some of its excess property (buildings and/or land) to affordable housing, providing places of nurture and safety to the most vulnerable in our society. And that, I am quite certain, is what Jesus would have us do with some of what we have.

One particular kind of building we have in our diocese requires a special kind of attention at this time. And in fact it is the easiest building of all for parishes to let go of and that is our rectories. I am growing increasingly uncomfortable with the current arrangement in this diocese whereby some clergy receive housing allowances and others are offered rectories. There is a fundamental unfairness to such a two-tier system, even if the roots of it go back nearly 30 years now. Clergy receiving housing allowances will naturally accumulate equity in their own properties and often own them by the time they retire, while those in rectories will not receive that benefit. The average member of the clergy today who serves 30 years or longer will move between four and six times and not have the privilege of living and retiring in the town they grew up in, making it very difficult to accumulate equity in any

one property. And while the official housing allowance is \$18000 per year, that is the tax-free amount, and the true (taxable) figure is more like \$25000. All clergy receiving housing allowances are ultimately better off than those who do not, partly because they also have the choice of where to live. We do not force the clergy near St. John's and on the northeast Avalon Peninsula to live in certain communities and we should not do it for those clergy living "around the bay." School teachers are not forced to live in certain places if they choose not to do so, neither should we do it with clergy. The rectory system that we have inherited in the church today is a feature from the past when clergy were all male and clergy families were single-income and dependent upon the church for their entire livelihood. That world has changed today with most clergy families no different from other families, frequently with their wives or husbands working and owning homes already.

The time has come to address these changes more directly in light of the fact that increasing numbers of parishes today are choosing to move away from rectories in favor of housing allowances for their clergy. Most of the rectories in the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador are now gone and we can already see the end of the rectory system coming. The truth is, I can see the end of the stipend system itself whereby clergy receive lower pay augmented by tax-free allowances and benefits because they work for a religious charity. This is a questionable privilege in a modern, secular society (as the Canada Revenue Agency has already made clear to us) and I predict that we will soon be talking about a standardized salary system for our clergy whereby they pay taxes like everyone else. Most parishes today are choosing to sell or rent their rectories depending upon their needs. And those parishes are finding housing allowances to be a benefit for both them and their clergy. Clergy working outside the northeast Avalon and living in rectories receive \$18000 per year less than those working in that area and receiving housing allowances. Forget the "free" rectory; the parish receives the "free" rectory, and the clergy pay for it in lost income throughout their career. As of 2015 all Stipend Sheets will show that clergy in rectories pay "rent" of \$18000 per year to their parish for the privilege of living in church housing.

Another concern I have with rectories dates back 30 years to when the Anglican Church of Canada opened the door to the ordination of women. The Anglican Church of Canada has not always had a good record in its treatment of those female clergy who became pregnant while living in rectories. Those young women who give their lives to this church are as deserving of our protection and care and none of them should ever have to worry about abuse or stress while living in a rectory as some of them have endured. If they were all free to live wherever they wanted to they would not have that worry. And still another concern I have about our current practice arises from my conversations with members of our Retired Clergy Association. The majority of them have had to carry mortgages into retirement and some have told me that they will be in their 80s before their mortgages are paid off. The most basic advice for retirement planning is to not have a mortgage at that point in life. We are a Diocese that decided a long time ago to adopt housing allowances for certain clergy. It may be time we considered housing allowances for all. I believe this to be an issue of human rights and fairness and that the time is coming for parishes to negotiate with clergy currently in rectories and new clergy being appointed regarding housing. In some of our more-isolated communities rectories make perfect sense. That may also be true in certain part-time positions where visiting clergy need temporary places to stay, but it is not true everywhere any longer. I am not asking for parishes to get rid of their rectories; I

am asking parishes to ask themselves if they still need rectories to house their clergy and as far as possible to give their clergy a choice: the same choice any other professional would receive today.

In reflecting theologically upon *Our Church and its Possessions* we do well to remember that God's People have always identified particular places as being of importance to their journey. Some of those places are in Jerusalem and in Rome and in Canterbury, while others are in St. John's and Trinity and in Battle Harbour. Holy places have always been associated with holy actions, and the memory of holy actions. But not all places are equally important for us and some have been important only for a time. Today the challenge is to ask what holy places we need to retain and what holy places we need to let go of. The Christian Church recognized this necessity long ago in the practice of Consecration and De-Consecration whereby some spaces were made holy when needed but returned to secular use when no longer needed. In clinging to so many holy places today I fear that we are clinging to a remembered past that no longer exists and which actually never existed in quite the way we want to remember it.

In life, we are a "tent people" whose journey is not complete until that last and great day when God gathers up all of his children. Until then we travel in God's light and under God's care, trusting in God to bring us home in his time. It's not that we don't need buildings and properties, but do we need as many as we have? If we are bold we might even discover that Anglicanism as we know it is not even dependent upon buildings but upon God and God's people together. In conclusion, I invite every congregation to reflect upon the properties it possesses and simply ask if "best use" is being made of what it owns? Beyond that, we all need to ask just how much property do we need to carry out the work to which we have been called?

I appreciate the opportunity to communicate in this way with you and look forward to future conversations. My next such pastoral letter will be sent to you in October and will be called, "**Our Church and its Hospitality.**"

With my every blessing upon your journey,

+*Geoff*

***I am the church! You are the church!***  
***We are the church together!***  
***All who follow Jesus,***  
***all around the world!***  
***Yes, we're the church together!***

*The church is not a building;*  
*the church is not a steeple;*  
*the church is not a resting place;*  
*the church is a people.*  
(Refrain)

*We're many kinds of people,*  
*with many kinds of faces,*  
*all colours and all ages, too*  
*from all times and places.*  
(Refrain)

*Sometimes the church is marching;*  
*sometimes it's bravely burning,*  
*sometimes it's riding, sometimes hiding;*  
*always it's learning.*  
(Refrain)

*And when the people gather,*  
*there's singing and there's praying;*  
*there's laughing and there's crying sometimes,*  
*all of it saying:*  
(Refrain)

*At Pentecost some people*  
*received the Holy Spirit*  
*and told the Good News through the world*  
*to all who would hear it.*  
(Refrain)