



*Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador*  
THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

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**A Pastoral Letter to the People of the Anglican Parish of St Philip's from the Rt. Rev. Dr. Geoff Peddle,  
Bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador  
Sunday, October 5, 2014**

My Dear People,

I write to you today from Labrador where I have spent the past week, travelling from Labrador City and Wabush to Happy Valley-Goose Bay, for the annual gathering of our church leadership in Labrador at the Labrador Planning and Strategy Conference. This Sunday morning I am sharing in a Confirmation Service at St. Andrew's Church in Happy Valley, the church where I was ordained Priest in 1988. A printed copy of my words to you this morning will be available on your way out of church.

My letter follows nine months of study and consideration on my part since becoming bishop in January of this year, although I began meetings on the matter even before I was consecrated as bishop. I have given great thought to your particular situation with regard to the deconsecrated church building in St. Philip's and its relationship to the present-day worshipping community. I have met formally with your congregation regarding this on three occasions: a congregational meeting, an Annual General Meeting, and most recently a meeting with your Vestry, the elected leadership of the Parish of St. Philip's. There have been many more informal meetings. Concurrent with that, I have had at least eleven discussions with the Church by the Sea Inc. or its representatives, including one lunch meeting with the complete Board of Directors. I have received over 100 submissions (my choice of word) on the matter of the old church. Those submissions have been in person, by e-mail, by letter, and over the telephone; no invitation to meet with interested persons has been declined. It was my hope that my participation in this way, listening intensely to all sides, might lead to the discovery of a common ground upon which all might be able to stand. I regret to inform you that I did not find that common ground.

It is, however, important for you to know that of the people communicating with me who actually live in the community of Portugal Cove-St. Philip's, who pay taxes there, who vote there, and who in most cases identified themselves as Anglicans and members of the Parish of St. Philip's, the ratio in favor of taking down the old church with dignity and care was over eight to one. For every one person who told me they wanted to see the old church preserved, there were more than eight who wanted the church removed. These are local people of the

local community who frequently told me they were baptized in the old church, confirmed and married there. Many of them had seen their children grow up and marry in the old church and had also buried parents from that building.

I recognize that there are others who disagree with any effort to remove the old church building and I respect their opinion. I have found Mr. Stephen Sharpe and the members of the Church by the Sea Inc. to be very professional in their conversations with me and respectful of my role as Diocesan Bishop. Indeed, I share their passion for the preservation of our past even as I recognize that it is not always possible to preserve everything but that choices – painful choices – must sometimes be made. I will also say that the potential was great for the old church building to be used in new ways such as a community museum when it ceased to be used for worship. But eleven years have now passed and the building has deteriorated immensely. I cannot change the past. I can only deal with the present and influence the future.

My words to follow may be illuminated further by two earlier documents written by me, both of which can be found on our diocesan website. I invite you to read both documents for a fuller understanding of my reasoning because I have much more to say there than I can say in this single letter. The most recent such paper is my Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of September 2014 entitled, ***Our Church and its Possessions***. There, among other things, I invite the people of our church to re-examine their relationship with all of our buildings and properties today because the burden of carrying them all is growing heavy. The other (and longer) document I invite you to read is my presentation to Diocesan Synod in May of 2014 entitled, ***The Anglican Church in Newfoundland and Labrador: The State of the Union***. There, I invited our people to view their church through the lens of its ministry and discipleship in the world and not through the lens of its buildings and properties. Another document that you might find helpful is a PowerPoint presentation by the Parish of St. Philip's from its Annual General Meeting in February 2009 called ***Vestry Proposal: The Old Church***. It shows the kind of careful consideration given to the matter by the Parish nearly six years ago and I ask the Parish to make it available on its website. Additionally, a February 20, 2009, letter from **Facilities Design Group Inc.** to the Parish Vestry that identified ten challenges to the redevelopment of the old church to present-day standards for use as a public facility was enlightening to me. I also ask the Parish to make that letter available. The rulings by the **Supreme Court** (2011) and the **Eastern Regional Appeal Board** (2013) in favor of the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador may also be helpful to read.

In the early years that followed the move from the old church there was very little discussion of the building and its alternate use. The last service in the old church was held on December 7, 2003, and the first service in the new on December 14, 2003. The official opening of the new church was on February 1, 2004 with Bishop Donald Harvey. Bishop Cyrus Pitman deconsecrated the old church on September 29, 2006. During those years the Parish was busy growing into its new building (with a steeple modeled on that of the old church) and wanted only to pay off that debt so it saw no reason to spend money on demolition although that was clearly the plan in the minds of the leadership in light of their acceptance of the diocesan directive to “dispose” of the old property. The fact that the heat was turned off, followed by the electricity and the ending of any maintenance on the old church confirm for me that the idea of keeping the church was not before the Vestry. In fact, the first significant discussion of the old church by Vestry did not happen until five years after its closure, in 2008, when a request was received to reopen the building. The Vestry's response was negative. In my recent conversations with people who were there at the time they tell me that their underlying concern was that the Parish would still have

to oversee the building and might one day have to resume full control in light of its location in the cemetery with graves underneath. Finally in 2009 the Vestry applied for a permit to take down the old building.

I won't belabor you with the details of what happened following that application to the Town because you already know the history better than I do. From 2009 until 2013 I was a parish priest in Mount Pearl and I confess that what I learned of the situation I learned from the media although I admit to feeling some shame over what I saw happening. It was apparent to me that strong passions had been awakened in Portugal Cove-St. Philip's. Regrettable things were said and done and divisions were created that continue to this day, even within families. The polarization of opinion was such that some people came to see this as a battle where there could be only winners and losers. Such passions do not lead us toward God but very much away from God. Whatever the outcome to this journey, all of us who belong to this church have already lost something.

A few things have developed more recently. The Diocese investigated the cost of moving the old building from the cemetery and received a rough estimate of about \$250,000. The Diocese also explored the cost of refurbishment of the old church and received a rough estimate of about \$455,000 (2013 figures). Both estimates may well be conservative. These are costs that neither the Parish nor Diocese can afford or are prepared to pay. There has been some new leadership in the Parish and Diocese and also in the Town Council. In 2011 the Diocese was successful in opposing an application by the former Town Council in the Supreme Court for an injunction to compel representatives of the Church by the Sea Inc. to be permitted to attend an inspection of the Old Church ordered by the former Town Council. Costs were ordered by the Court to be paid to the Diocese by the Town. In 2013, the Diocese was successful in an appeal to the Eastern Regional Appeal Board against an Order made by the former Town Council to repair the Old Church at the cost to the Diocese. While this decision found that the Order to Repair failed to meet necessary legal standards, it also found there was a perception of bias on the part of the former Town Council by virtue of its interaction with the Church by the Sea Inc. at that time.

As a parish priest and now as a bishop I have always trusted the wisdom of the local community and tried to discern that wisdom in decision-making. This is one case where I believe the wisdom of that local community must be paramount. As much as those who live outside Portugal Cove-St. Philip's might want their opinions to determine the outcome to this discussion, the local community must have the final say. Public debates in various media, websites and *Facebook* postings cannot decide this matter. The people of the community, face to face, must decide it. The Parish leadership, elected and otherwise, to the best of my judgment, are 100% in favor of taking down the old church with dignity and care. There is no one in a Parish leadership position asking otherwise. An overwhelming percentage of the parishioners agree. I trust their wisdom. I wish that every decision I have before me as bishop affecting a parish had such clarity from the people.

I also trust the wisdom of the Town Council of Portugal Cove-St. Philip's. The people elected to care for the entire community also have a role in this. They should know the mind of the people they are responsible for much better than those of us who live outside. And although I would have no argument with the old church finding a new life, I do not know how to get there from here. Because of my trust in the "wisdom of the local," and my meeting with Vestry of September 15 that convinced me again of that wisdom, I have decided to allow the Parish of St. Philip's to make application to the Town of Portugal Cove-St. Philip's to take down their old church with dignity and care. I expect that the Town will have a healthy, fair, respectful, and public debate on this application and ask that the Town Councilors be afforded full cooperation and access by the Parish during

their discussions. This process will also allow those who want to preserve the old church another hearing, this one with their elected municipal representatives. I have directed our Diocesan Chancellor, Mr. Brad Wicks QC, to work with the Parish and the Town on this and also to act as Spokesperson for the Parish and Diocese as we move forward. I applaud the Parish's intention to pursue the creation of a memorial park and columbarium on the location of the old church and I attach that as one of my conditions to allowing this application to go forward.

In closing I appeal to all sides in this debate to treat one another with respect and courtesy. I ask the members of the Parish to work closely with your Rector, the Rev. Ed Keeping in the days ahead. I ask everyone that there be no personal attacks on anyone from either side but that we remain focused upon the issue before us and not the personalities before us. I will have little to say publicly as things unfold over the next while because I believe this needs to be a local conversation between neighbors within the Town of Portugal Cove-St. Philip's.

If I have an overriding regret, it is that is the real story of the Anglican Church in St. Philip's has been overlooked in this discussion. That story is much greater than this recent narrative of controversy over a church building. In fact, your true story is not about a building at all but about a community of faith over 200 years old. During that time the Anglican Church has been part of the fabric of life in St. Philip's; giving meaning to all that life brings: cradling new lives in baptism, blessing couples in marriage, embracing loved ones in death, and everything in between. That is the true story of your church – the story of a faith community journeying with God – and we do well to remember it.

I promised the people of the Parish of St. Philip's that I would walk closely with you this year and spend as much time as I could among you. My Lenten Quiet Day for 2014 was held in your Parish and I announce today that my Advent Quiet Day will also be held there on Saturday, December 6, from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. It will be a single talk in three parts based upon John 1:14 and entitled: "***The Word was made flesh ... and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth.***" Much more information on the Quiet Day will be available in the coming weeks.

In closing, I thank everyone for this opportunity to speak to you in this way today. I look forward to seeing you all in person soon after my return to Newfoundland.

With my every blessing,

+*Geoff*

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Geoff Peddle