



## **I am the church! You are the church!**

**Moments of Grace**  
**April 21, 2015**

It is Tuesday night and I have just learned that the Town Council of Portugal Cove – St. Philip's has voted in favor of the request by the Parish of St. Philip's and the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador to take down the former church building after 12 years of disuse. In the coming days there will be important decisions made by the Parish and Diocese on the process of removing the building. Following that there will be a new request to Council for the construction of a memorial park on the site to include benches and trees and columbaria to hold the ashes of loved ones. A monument will also be included to mark the location of the former church.

And tomorrow the sun will rise once more and life will go on for the people of the parish and the town although in some ways things will never be the same. To say that this has been a bruising journey would be an understatement. It has been an incredibly difficult journey for many involved that has led to deep divisions among some that we can only hope will heal with time.

I have not had much to say about this process for some time now. The last time I wrote about it was in my *Pastoral Letter to the Parish of St Philip's* in October 2014. In that letter I said I trusted the wisdom of the parishioners to determine their own future with regard to the old church. I also said I trusted the wisdom of their elected representatives on the Town Council of Portugal Cove – St. Philip's. I do not believe that my trust was misplaced then. I do not believe my trust is misplaced now. A decision has been made by Council to allow the removal of the old church consistent with the overwhelming desire of the parish members and the majority of the town.

If there is disappointment for me tonight it lies in the lack of common ground between those who wanted the church removed and those who wanted it restored. The parishioners decided 12 years ago to leave the old church and move to the new and said good-bye to the old building then, even if it remained standing for over a decade.

For them there was no going back. Since then the parish has wanted to remove the former church building because they did not want the responsibility for it. Giving responsibility to an external group could never be seriously considered in light of its location in the cemetery with graves underneath. As long as the building was located where it was the parish was responsible for it and they wanted to end that obligation. If the building could be disassembled and moved from the site they were willing to allow that (and still are as far as I know). But leaving it on the site with someone else managing it was never an option.

I have received lots of correspondence on this matter since becoming bishop in 2014. Some has been in favor of removing the building; some has been in favor of restoring it. Some has been simply seeking understanding. From the mail it was apparent to me early on that there were two mutually exclusive interests. Those in favor of retaining the building (the majority of whom were neither parishioners nor members of the town) argued for its historical and cultural significance, but not necessarily its religious significance. Those in favor of taking down the building (the majority of whom were parishioners and members of the town) argued for the future life of the church community. The local parishioners were never convinced of the value of keeping the old church and decided not to burden themselves with a property that did not serve their ministry.

It's not as if the Anglicans of Newfoundland and Labrador have anything against historical properties. In the Dioceses of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador, Central Newfoundland, and Western Newfoundland we currently maintain about 250 active churches (83 in this diocese). Many of them are quite historical. And we maintain them in the best possible way by using them as part of active, worshipping communities who care for them and maintain them faithfully. You can add hundreds more cemeteries retained by Anglicans in the province and scores of rectories and parish halls and you can easily see just how much we value the properties of our past. But the key is the commitment of the local community to do that. We have never maintained everything we built and over the 300 years of official Anglican presence here there have been hundreds of church buildings taken down as congregations moved or grew.

In St. Philip's the commitment of the parishioners to keep the old church was not there. It never was. If those who wanted the former church restored failed in their mission, it was in their inability to convince the members of the parish of the value of keeping it. The parishioners chose long ago to move from their old church and build a new one designed to meet the needs of a modern congregation and big enough to hold everyone. In that sense, the old church in St. Philip's does indeed live on in the lives and hearts and faith of its members. Only a building will disappear. The church will continue.

I end with this old children's' hymn:

***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)

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)

With my every blessing,  
**+Geoff**