



It's the people, not the steeple

Moments of Grace

April 8, 2015

I write from the Parish of Labrador West tonight and have just returned from the former St. Peter's Church building in Wabush that was deconsecrated and returned to secular use this evening. For years the members of that congregation have been discussing their future in light of a decline in the number of worshippers and more recently have pondered a move to St. Paul's Church in Labrador City. In December past they voted to do that and tonight it became official as the Declaration of Secularization was read.

Despite all of the finality associated with such an event the service was a true celebration in which we not only gave thanks for the past but looked to the future with hope. About 60 members of both congregations including many children participated and it is clear that the people of St. Paul's have welcomed the people of St. Peter's in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Archdeacon Nellie Thomas and her husband, Derek, also shared in the service along with Deacon Rowena Payne. I preached on the disciples' unexpected discovery of Jesus among them in the Upper Room after his resurrection and presided with the Rector, Reverend Jolene Peters, at the altar as the Holy Eucharist was celebrated on it for the last time.

Reverend Jolene's leadership of the parish community to this point has been impeccable and the people of the parish have been able to fully discuss their options as they shared their feelings with each other and with her. At the end of that process, it was their decision and it was a decision well-made so that they could embrace a new and stronger future together. I have borrowed my title for this *Moments of Grace* from the title of an article about them in *The Aurora*, the community newspaper of Labrador West. In that article called, "***It's the people, not the steeple,***" published on April 6 reporter Ty Dunham quoted Reverend Jolene:

"The church is the community of people who come together, they support each other in the difficult times of life and they celebrate their moments of joy together. They're on the journey together as a community of Christian people ... I think we'll come out stronger through this. People are learning something more. We might not have two churches anymore, but we have one and we can still do our ministries and services."

In identifying community, ministry and service, Jolene has affirmed the most important reasons for this change in the Parish of Labrador West. In Wabush and Labrador City two congregations have come together and are moving forward in exciting ways. Numerous people identified ministry to children as a key motivation and noted the thriving *Godly Play* program at St. Paul's. Yes, a church building has closed but the community of believers continues.

It is Easter Week as I write and we have just journeyed through the story of Jesus' death and resurrection that is central to our faith as Christians. Just as resurrection followed Jesus' death on the first Easter, resurrection follows death in the life of our church today. Sometimes we need to let go of some things so new life can flourish. The good people of Wabush and Labrador City have shown us all what can happen when people come together in faith for all the right reasons. Let us learn from their example and hold them in our prayers during this time of change and new beginnings.

My final words are actually not mine but belong to Reverend Jolene from her article in the April 2015 edition of *Anglican Life*. I could not possibly write better than this fine Priest as she brings into sharp focus what has really happened in the life of our church in Labrador. She has captured this moment perfectly and begins with the question, "What have I learned?"

"I learned that yes, we have these beautiful buildings, stained glass windows, beautiful furnishings, but that is not the church. The church is the people who gather, the people who hold each other up in difficult times of life and celebrate when there are moments of joy. A decision that has been years in the making has now been made, and those who once gathered in that building now join in fellowship and worship with the congregation of St. Paul's in Labrador City. Our ministries are being strengthened, our parish is being renewed and Sunday after Sunday when I gather with the people I experience a little more of the Kingdom of God here on earth. This decision was not easy and as we gather in April for a service of deconsecration there will be tears of sadness, but I give thanks. I give thanks for the many years St. Peter's Church building served the needs of the people of Wabush, I give thanks for the many hours of dedication and service of the members of that congregation over the years and I give thanks that as they have reached this point in their ministry together I can journey this road with them as we learn, grow and serve God together. The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church in Labrador West is most certainly a people!"

With my every blessing,
+Geoff