



# Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

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## **Bishop's Third Pastoral Letter, November 2014: *Our Church and its Children***

*People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. (From Mark 10)*

I was at a gathering of important church leaders recently when one of them said something like this: "Well, we all know the future of our church will be composed of more and more older people and fewer and fewer young people, so we need to invest more in the older and less in the younger." When I asked him if perhaps the very reason we have fewer young persons in church today is precisely because we have *already* invested less in them he had no answer.

I find it difficult to accept such an attitude among church leaders today, whether ordained or not, because I believe it is not faithful to the call of our Lord to include children fully in the life of our worshipping community. Such an attitude compounds a challenge we face in wider society today with those who believe that children should not be exposed to religious values "until they are old enough to make up their own minds". Such people often equate religion with some form of indoctrination and yet see no issue with many of the other types of influence that society and media bring to bear on their children. As people of faith we believe that the influence and teaching of religious values can be a good thing and we want their children exposed to the rich teachings of the Bible and the affirming influence of the faith community through Sunday Schools, Vacation Bible Schools, the CLB, children and youth choirs, and many other kinds of children's ministries. Jesus had a ministry to children and so should we as we seek to fulfill our calling to pass on the faith in an increasingly secular world. Jesus blessed children and he calls us to bless them also.

The church's ministry to children and young persons today is one I consider both vital and specialized. It is vital because children and younger persons are full and precious members of our community. It is vital because the ministry to children comes from our Lord who demonstrated his love for them in the Gospels. I believe we must be a church that says to children: "You are welcome here," and also says,

“You can be children here.” Children are spiritual beings and our ministry is sometimes as simple as recognizing the Spirit of God at work in them already. Ministry to children is also a specialized ministry requiring an investment from the community in time and resources. In order for it to be done well, appropriate persons with appropriate gifts must be trained and equipped and supported.

It is probably true that not every church can offer ideal programs for children and youth but more of our churches can do that with the right leadership and planning and sharing. Not every church has the money to pay their children’s leaders so volunteers run most of our ministry programs for children. A church that truly values its children will actively recruit volunteers and then support and encourage them. The issue as I see it is that some congregations claim to value children’s ministry but don’t actually make it a priority. Actions really do speak louder than words here. As I stated at Diocesan Synod in May of 2014, I continue to hear of Sunday Schools where most of what the children do is color pictures with leaders who are not trained or equipped and who have no budget for their ministry. We can offer children so very much more! For many parishes change may need to begin not with the children but with the adults. We may need to begin by educating our vestries and by finding adults who are passionate about including and celebrating children. It is also true that clergy are not always well trained for this ministry and may need equipping. At the very least the clergy need to affirm ministry to children and if they themselves are not comfortable engaging in it to make sure they empower those who are.

I will not endorse one program for children and youth over another because what works in one place may not work in another. But I do ask for each worshipping community to talk about this and explore their options in this regard. As I also noted at Diocesan Synod, 70-80% of our core worshipping membership is composed of people 50 years of age and older even though 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. An inclusive and broad church will reflect the wider population around it. We have abandoned ministry to children in church after church because some of us have concluded that there are not enough children or adult leaders to make it happen. I recently went somewhere with no children’s ministry and counted over a dozen children in church! Again from my address to Synod: five communities with five children in each will not produce five Sunday Schools but if those five found a way to come together for the sake of their children alone you would have 25 children together. We should be thinking about partnering with other denominations on this one ministry for the sake of all our children because the challenge we face as Anglicans is not unique to our church.

As I travel across our diocese I see so many good efforts being made to include children, and those efforts range from the traditional and familiar to the innovative and fresh. I am seeing an increasing number of children’s centers in our worship spaces (as opposed to our halls) so that children do not always have to leave their parents and families during worship. I am not a big fan of “children’s talks” in church for more reasons than I want to list here and I am glad that some parishes have also recognized that they don’t need to have them in church every Sunday but can include children in other ways and provide for their needs differently. In my last parish we had a theme conversation in church only once per month because we offered so much else for children that such conversations were not

necessary every week. Many churches use multipurpose space for their children's ministry that can be a challenge in rooms designed for adults. If you value children's ministry decorate and arrange the rooms with them in mind. Parents today seek safe and attractive learning areas with facilities that are child-friendly.

I strongly suggest that every parish and congregation of our diocese consider their children and youth in their decisions as they move forward, from budgets to times of services to programs. How are their needs reflected in vestry and parish council decisions? Some churches are actively planning for children and youth and young families and others do not even talk about them. When our maintenance and cemetery budgets vastly exceed our budgets for children and youth ministry we need to look at what we are doing. Churches that value children's ministry will invest in it financially. Please pardon me for sounding crude, but if we say that we value children's ministry we will put our money where our mouth is.

Some of the most important thinkers for me on the inclusion of children in church in a way that fosters their growth and spirituality and enhances their membership are Joyce Ann Mercer, Jerome Berryman and Rebecca Nye although there are many others who have important things to teach us about children and their relationship with God *and* their relationship with us. My main purpose in writing this letter is simply to advocate for the children and young people of our church because they are often without anyone to advocate for them. Unless we deliberately recognize their importance and set out to include them it is not very likely that they will ask for it themselves. I also want to affirm that there are more children in our congregations and communities than we might realize. A little research might be in order for all of us. *Who are the people in your neighborhood?* Some of us might discover that there are far more children and young persons around us than we thought.

My next such pastoral letter will be sent to you in December and will be called, **“Our Church and Education.”**

With my every blessing upon your journey,

+*Geoff*