



# *Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador*

## *The Anglican Church of Canada*

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### **Bishop's Eighth Pastoral Letter, April 2015** **Our Church and the Future**

Dear Friends,

This is my eighth and final such letter to the Diocese following our Diocesan Synod in May of 2014. It will soon be a year since that synod concluded and I decided then to reflect theologically upon our work in a series of letters so that the work of synod could be encouraged to continue. Today I conclude with my closing reflection entitled **Our Church and the Future**. This letter comes to you during the season of Easter when we celebrate the Good News of Jesus' resurrection and the promise of new life for all who believe. Our church is called to not only tell that Good News but *be* the Good News in our world. Let us look to the future with that in mind.

I realize that it is always risky to speak of the future with any confidence because there are so many variables at play that confound any attempt to precisely state what the future will bring. Too often attempts to discuss the future amount to little more than exercises in opinion with little connection to what the evidence is really telling us. However, there is another way forward whereby we look at the trends already evident in our community and project forward from there. That is a responsible way to discuss the future in a way that allows us to be proactive in planning, bearing in mind that no amount of analysis will ever account for all that we will encounter. I would set the limit to this type of forecast as no more than 25 years from now but there can be great value in considering what may happen in our church community over that period of time. I realize that in this letter I may be vulnerable to the accusation of simply stating my own opinion but I do hope that it is an educated opinion and one that I am able to defend. As I see it, our church can either react constantly to what happens or work now to shape its future in responsible ways.

Before proceeding any further it is important to remember that we serve a God who holds past, present and future in his hands. From scripture we learn that all of creation is the work of God. Time is part of the created order. God, we learn, is timeless, always was, always will be. I remain deeply skeptical about efforts to discern the future from scripture in the way some religious groups have done so over the years. They possess a confidence about what is going to happen that even Jesus did not claim: *"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"* (Mark 13:32). Scripture does tell us that it is the plan of God to restore all things to their intended perfection and Jesus was sent to embody that mission to our world. Even though we may be tempted to despair in the face of brokenness in our world today, as Christians we remain people of hope, inspired by God's promise to set all things right again in Christ. Both the Old and New Testaments speak of the future. Some books like Daniel and Revelation are very much about the future and encourage God's people in every age to look to a time of perfection and healing. The challenge is to

interpret the message in a responsible way for the church today. The church needs to be humble enough to admit that there are some things it cannot know even if it can be confident of an endpoint in which God is triumphant and creation is restored. That remains a central Christian hope for all of us.

What then, can we say about our future as Anglicans in the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador? I believe there is much we can say in light of scripture, our shared faith, and a responsible consideration of the patterns of our life evident today. So, having identified all of the cautions above, I want to briefly discuss our future in light of them.

The most apparent trend in the life of our church is a changing pattern of membership and motivation for belonging. In the last 50 years we have seen our official membership decline by half or more everywhere in Canada, including Newfoundland and Labrador. And yet, in this province, people have retained a relationship with our church not always defined by weekly attendance and regular financial support. At least half the ministry of our church today is to those who are not official members but who want the ministry of the church at key moments of change and transition in their lives and in particular during times of pastoral emergency. In that sense, the core membership of our church who regularly attend, financially support, and uphold our ministries enable the church to reach beyond itself into the world to tell the good news to those on the margins or who belong not at all. The Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador today has over 30,000 members in 35 parishes and 84 active churches and I am confident that we will be here into the future, even if we will not look like we did in the past. Which brings me to a challenge for us today ...

Religious people are sometimes inclined to dream more of the past than they do of the future. Too often church members dedicate themselves primarily to maintaining the past rather than engaging with the future (or even the present!) in fresh and inspired ways. The truth is, the past is gone and cannot be resurrected by us no matter how much we might want to. That past has led us into a fluid and shifting present that points to a different future for us as Anglicans. In that future we will continue to fulfill vital roles in community building and outreach alongside worship, teaching and pastoral care. A consideration of the changing patterns of affiliation and participation in the life of our church is vital for those in leadership. We cannot keep things as they are or as we remember them from the past if we are to be a sustainable and responsive community of faith moving forward.

We have become a rapidly aging church and we need to address that as we move into the future. Across this diocese the active leadership of the church continues to depend upon the older segment of our population. There are not nearly enough younger persons with young families taking leadership in the church today, even if they are members and attend. Unfortunately their voices are not heard as clearly in decision-making. I encounter vestries composed entirely of retired persons and that tells me that we need to actively recruit leaders from the younger part of our population so that their voices may be heard more clearly in important decisions we face moving forward. The younger generations among and around us need to be invited and included more fully in the life of our church.

We need to become a church less defined by our buildings and properties and more defined by our ministry, service and discipleship. That will necessitate some hard and painful decisions in the years ahead as we seek better and more effective ways to be the People of God in the world. I predict that 25 years from now we will have fewer church buildings and many of those will be welcoming and modern structures embracing people from multiple communities. They will be designed not just for worship but also for fellowship and feeding, hospitality and teaching, so that the blessing we are is open to the world around us.

We need to reflect upon what the Anglican Church in Newfoundland and Labrador would look like if some of our parishes, congregations and other communities came together in fresh ways for the sake of ministry and not for the sake of maintenance and survival. There is a place here for inspired leadership today. I have heard the argument many times that people will not move from their old and familiar church communities to new ones

and that may be true if the new communities offer nothing new. But what happens if fresh and invigorated church communities (and buildings) emerge drawing people into new relationships with each other and with God? The Marks of Mission discussed in my last pastoral letter may be a good starting point for change as we look at becoming a more missional church in the world. And it's not just the number of our churches that may change; the number of dioceses may also change. Will Newfoundland and Labrador always have three Anglican dioceses? Let's wait and see.

As a bishop, I have concerns about the recruitment of future clergy and their training. Sound leadership remains crucial for a good future for us and we need to encourage new vocations and those already ordained to become as well educated as possible. In terms of theological education this presents certain challenges and opportunities today that may not be tied to Queen's College but developed with other partners and educational institutions. The days of the young, single, male candidate for ordination are largely gone. Our new clergy today are generally older than they used to be with one career behind them, often married with children, frequently with a spouse also working. Right now, most of the new people coming forward to discuss ordination in our church are female and one day soon we will have our first female bishop. Our clergy deserve to be compensated for their work in a manner appropriate to their education and skills and if we are going to recruit the best persons we can for this work, they need to know that the life we offer them will be fulfilling. We must ensure that we attract the best possible persons to our parish and diocesan positions and that may mean changes to how we compensate and house our clergy.

In the future I believe rectories will become optional in most parishes so that clergy can have choice in their housing (many already own homes). This is crucial for clergy as they enter retirement. I am dismayed to learn that fully 66% of the retired clergy in this diocese are paying off mortgages in retirement (some have told me they will be in their 80's before their mortgages are paid off!). This percentage of our clergy retirees with mortgages is far above the Newfoundland and Canadian average and is a direct result of the rectory system under which they worked. Sadly, many of these same clergy worked to pay off rectories for parishes during their years of active ministry but in retirement have no benefit in return. The potential for home ownership should be a basic right for our clergy today. Parishes need to seek the very best candidates possible for their ministries and providing good care for clergy and their families can be crucial to this.

In the future I believe we will come to an understanding on human sexuality that allows us all to live and worship and serve together as People of Faith regardless of sexual orientation and preference. Indeed, the vast majority of us in the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador have already come to this point even if we may not all read Holy Scripture in the same way, and yet I believe that the study of scripture will show the way forward for everyone. Today our common life is greatly enriched by the involvement and participation of members of the LGBT community and I celebrate the distance we have travelled together even if I know that there remain some miles yet to go.

I have come to believe that partnerships with government agencies and community groups with shared interests will become our growing edge into the future. This work is already well underway with all sorts of innovative relationships formed and forming in many of our parishes and also with our diocese. I see great evidence today that the total ministry of our church is actually expanding and becoming established in fresh ways. In fact, I believe that the potential growth in this area is such that our ministry will become greater than we can possibly support on our own and therefore we need to partner with others to enable the increase in resources that is needed. Partnerships in the future will be at least four kinds:

**Diocese – Parish**

**Parish – Parish**

**Diocese/Parish – Secular and government agencies**

**Diocese/Parish – Other Christian and non-Christian faith communities**

We need to understand the idea of Faith Based Community Organizing (FBCO) and related concepts as we extend our ministries into the world. The conversation around shared responsibilities and partnerships needs to happen around our pastoral and community ministries but also around our buildings, properties and land if we are to sustain and benefit from all that we have into the future. We should not be afraid to invite partners with skills the church does not always possess to manage assets on our behalf while ensuring that the mission of the church is protected. To this end, I ask that our next diocesan synod in the spring of 2016 look at the relationship of our church to the wider community. I want us to do some serious work around partnerships and ministries beyond the visible church so that we may be better equipped as the People of God moving forward.

And finally, the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador should consider a capital campaign in the next five years to support existing and emerging ministries. It has now been 25 years since the TEAM Campaign (Together Earnestly Assisting Ministry) brought us all together in that way. Many of our parishes have developed their own financial plans and appeals but we are not all under the same umbrella in this work. I believe now is the time for all of us to come together in a new appeal that will put in place financial supports for our ministries and initiatives over the next 25 years. I have already raised this matter with the Diocesan Executive Committee and with some diocesan leaders and received favourable responses. I believe the time has come to consider developing a parish and diocesan ministry plan linking existing parish initiatives (and new initiatives!) with an overall diocesan plan. What I contemplate is something along the lines of the GIFT Campaign (Growing In Faith Together) of the Diocese of Ottawa but tailored to our needs.

As a further incentive, our National Church will make available to us through its resources the ability to conduct a feasibility study in 2015 at no cost to us. At the very least I believe we need to do that and then make a final decision. I hope to see work on this develop over the course of this year with a final proposal ready for Diocesan Synod in 2016. I seek nothing less than a stable and sustainable plan that will shape the next 25 years of our life together as the People of God in this place. The Anglicans I see across the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador want to be proud of their church. They want to know that they are part of something bigger than their local parish and that they make a difference in the world. Let us enable that to happen in the coming years as we face our future with hope, with confidence and with joy!

This concludes my series of eight pastoral letters to you since synod last year. In that time I have written on the following:

*Our Church and its Possessions*  
*Our Church and its Hospitality*  
*Our Church and its Children*  
*Our Church and Education*  
*Our Church and Community*  
*Our Church and the Kingdom of God*  
*Our Church and the Marks of Mission*  
*Our Church and the Future*

All such letters may be found on our diocesan website under my page along with some of my other writings. Periodically as we move forward I will issue new letters addressing particular matters. I thank you for the privilege of being your bishop.

With my every blessing,  
 +Geoff