

Council of Churches 20th Anniversary Dinner
A Talk Given by Bishop Geoff Peddle

The Salvation Army in Mount Pearl, May 4, 2018

It is a great honor for me to speak to you on your 20th anniversary dinner. Since its inaugural meeting on Sunday, April 19, 1998 at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, the St. Johns and Area Council of Churches has brought together members of various Christian denominations to share, explore and educate one another on our shared journey as followers of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I thank Mr. George Powell for his leadership of this body and for his continued example to us of Christian discipleship. We give thanks for all who have enabled this gathering over the years and tonight we remember in particular our Founding President, Canon Ralph Billard.

Although Ralph is not with us in person tonight, his rich influence and great spirit continues, and we are blessed that his wife, Kay *is* here with us. In a meeting I had with George Powell a couple of months ago when he asked me to speak to you this evening, George referred to “Ralph’s burden of Christians working together ... under the sovereignty of Christ.” As we celebrate this 20-year milestone in Christian ecumenical relations, we honor Ralph for playing such a big part in making it all happen. To quote from my homily at his funeral service on March 5, 2014:

Our Church is better today because of Ralph and his service to God. Many years ago Ralph accepted Jesus’ invitation to take the yoke he offered but the agricultural analogy ends there. Because it was not a docile or passive type of service that Ralph gave. Because Ralph made a difference wherever he went. No draft animal, he! Ralph, to me, was a lion of our Church, a Priest unafraid to proclaim the truth as he understood it and whose positive influence continues.

The St John’s and Area Council of Churches is one of the places where Ralph’s influence continues most strongly. According to its Charter, the Council exists, “to give expression to the fundamental unity of the several Christian communions” ... “to promote through cooperative efforts with all agencies the spiritual, moral, social and civic welfare of the community” and “to promote respectful understanding of other religious communities.”

These are curious times to be a person of faith in Newfoundland Labrador and also in Canada. Although we know well the immense contribution we have made to our wider society, and which we continue, there are people of influence today in public service, in government, in the media, who choose to forget and deny that contribution. It is necessary today for people of faith not to squander their energy and passion debating all of the points upon which we might differ but instead to invest that same energy and passion in working together as far as possible and telling our story so that we may truly proclaim the Good News of God in Christ.

I quote from an earlier talk I gave ...

Faith communities, along with voluntary associations and charities, continue to fulfill a vital role, occupying that space we call “Civil Society” located between government and the marketplace. There, faith communities work together for the common good and contribute in lasting ways, shouldering many social responsibilities like affordable housing and poverty elimination. The contribution of faith communities is impressive in terms of their engagement and civic investment. The American sociologist, Robert Putnam (*American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*), discusses the “supercharged” nature of volunteerism among people of faith. I can point to studies in the United Kingdom and the United States showing that church members are motivated *beyond the ordinary* by their faith to contribute millions of volunteer hours to society every year. The **Halo Canada Project**, a research project aimed at measuring the economic impact of religious communities, released

a report this year stating that just 25 congregations in Toronto from various faith traditions have a “Halo Effect” of \$73 million per year in terms of their programs and services (*Anglican Journal*, May 2017).

People of faith, whatever their tradition, contribute immensely to the social fabric of Newfoundland and Labrador. We are citizens, taxpayers, workers and volunteers.

A 2017 analysis of religious values in Canada called **Faith in Canada 150**, based upon polling by the Angus Reid Institute in collaboration with the think tank Cardus, indicates that religious belief continues to influence the social and political views of Canadians, motivating many into action. A *National Post* article evaluating this poll (Ray Pennings: “Faith plays a big role in how Canadians see the world,” May 17, 2017) ends with these words: “Religious faith has a role to play in Canada’s public life. It’s key to personal identity for most of us and helps us to make sense of the world. It doesn’t push us to the extremes. It impels us to care for others. That’s worth thinking about when we consider the next 150 years of Canadian society.”

In my 2014 Pastoral Letter to the Church on Community I wrote:

I believe that some of the most important players in any social plan for Newfoundland and Labrador going forward are religious groups and communities. These groups not only add value to the discussion but also bring with them ready-made networks of volunteers and infrastructure that can enable governments to better reach communities and serve their people. One of the greatest values of religious communities today lies in their ability to speak effectively on behalf of those who are often marginalized by society and whose influence over the levers of power is weak. It is incumbent upon those holding public office to protect and enhance local communities, religious and otherwise, in order to preserve a vital human dimension to our common life here. The choice should not be between religion or no religion in the public sector but instead should center on how government partners with all of its citizens – both secular and religious – for the common good.

Which brings me to recent correspondence between the St. Johns and Area Council of Churches and the Mayor’s Office of the City of St. John’s and the Office of the Premier. I cannot tell you how disappointed I am that both have now declined to send greetings on the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. A letter received from the Private Secretary to the Lieutenant Governor and the Provincial Protocol Officer, writing on behalf of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, stated that in order for requests for the participation of Government to be granted they must be “non-commercial, non-religious and non-political.” A letter from the Mayor of the City of St. John’s stated that the city is “unable to hear proclamations which are matters of political controversy, ideological or religious beliefs, or individual conviction.” And yet, less than one year ago in a gathering called *Faith in the Public Square*, hosted by the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador at the Parish of St. Mary the Virgin in St. John’s, and attended by 400 interested persons of all religious convictions and no religious conviction, written greetings were received from the Lieutenant Governor, the Premier, and the Prime Minister.

What gives?

People of faith are “citizens, taxpayers, workers and volunteers.” Is it too much to ask their government leaders to send greetings and best wishes? One could be forgiven for asking if certain levels of government still value the participation of faith communities.

And then we have the recent controversy over summer jobs funding in which religious groups must state their support for abortion rights in order to apply for federal government funding to hire students. Starting this year, the federal government is requiring Canada Summer Jobs applicants to check off a box attesting that the organization’s core mandate respects “individual human rights,” with reproductive rights specifically mentioned.

But the wording of the attestation has caused widespread backlash. Newfoundland Liberal MP Scott Simms has stated that the attestation should be changed. “The application is asking [churches] to do something that they shouldn’t be asked to do for the sake of a summer job for kids,” he said.

Our own Rex Murphy has written that ... “It’s a strange turn. How does one get from students trying to work off their education debts to a government insisting its citizens declare themselves on issues of the deepest moral and religious sensitivity?”

Some churches were able to sign the attestation. Others were not. For the Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto alone, the impact on their nearly 30 parishes and charities is \$1.1 million in grant applications.

I recognize there is a range of opinion on this matter, however, I am deeply unsettled that some religious groups, out of their conviction, were ineligible to apply for summer jobs funding. It scares me immensely when a secular government takes upon itself the authority to tell you what to think and believe.

In my opinion this has been an unnecessary controversy. Government needs to tread softly when dealing with issues of personal conscience. The right to dissent is fundamental to our democracy. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has said that the attestation “seriously undermines the right to religious freedom since the Government of Canada is directly limiting the right of religious traditions to hold, teach and practise their principles and values in public.”

Which, after my theological, sociological historical and political journey far and wide tonight, brings me back to the great work of the St John’s and Area Council of Churches in this, its 21st year. As I said earlier, “These are curious times to be a person of faith in Newfoundland Labrador and also in Canada.” My hope for the Council of Churches, in these curious times, is that it may be both faith and reason, salt and light, flavoring and illuminating. My hope for this body of believers is that we may be an example of tolerance and respect to our world, reminding others of who we are and who Jesus is. May this great Council of Christians also be a beacon, so that if someone should ask, “What does Christianity look like?” others may point to us and say, “There! That’s what Christianity looks like.”

On January 22, 2017, the Council of Churches gathered us to remember the Protestant Reformation, appropriately at the Church of St Pius X in St. John’s during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. That day I shared the pulpit with Archbishop Martin Curry – it was a tight fit, but we shared it! We reflected on the journey of the past 500 years and I spoke on Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John (15:1-8)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower ... Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Jesus’ words remind us that our life as Christians come from him. “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.*” Through Christ, we also belong to the Father. “*Abide in me as I abide in you.*” A little later Jesus tells us: “*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*” And through Christ we are enabled to bear much good fruit as his disciples. The true vine of the Christian Church, whether the branch is Roman Catholic, or Orthodox, or Protestant, or Anglican or whatever, is Jesus Christ. He remains our common link to one another and through him, to God.

We are called to take steps toward reconciliation but must also recognize that true reconciliation is a gift from God by whom all is created and from whom every good gift comes. "I am the vine," Jesus says, "you are the branches, my Father is the vinegrower."

If we read just a little further in John's Gospel (Chapter 17) we will hear our Lord pray for his disciples. And what did He want for those closest to him? Jesus prayed that they be one. This is His prayer to God in Heaven for his followers who are to remain in the world after his Ascension:

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

Jesus asks his Father to ensure is that his followers remain one as they strive to fulfill their mission. "*Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name ... so that they may be one as we are one.*"

To some it may appear that the answer to Jesus' prayer has not yet come. There are dozens of Christian denominations in our province today, each worshipping God in their own distinctive way, each emphasizing certain aspects of Holy Scripture, and each operating in the community in accordance with their own traditions and teachings.

The answer to Jesus' prayer seems to be a long way off. Or is it?

What if the "oneness" Jesus prays for is not what we might expect? Perhaps Jesus is not praying for unity as we might seek it in standardized organizations and denominational merger. Perhaps His prayer is not that diversity be stifled and every single Christian be a carbon-copy of the next. Perhaps his prayer is for something far deeper and far more profound and is already being realized. Perhaps Jesus' prayer is that those who would follow Him have a unity of heart and purpose. Could it be that John Wesley understood this in his sermon "Catholic Spirit, when he preached, "**Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?"** I suggest to you this evening that the good work of the St John's and Area Council of Churches is consistent with this vision. "**Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?"**

Or as a recent letter from this Council of Churches states: "**In essentials unity, In nonessentials liberty, In all things love.**" Although we do not yet manifest that full unity in Christ toward which we now turn, we do manifest a growing unity in more and more areas. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, was fond of describing the Christian Church as a signpost pointing toward the Kingdom of God. That signpost is not the Kingdom but directs the pilgrim toward it. And remember that even a broken or unfinished signpost can guide a traveler.

I believe that Jesus continues to pray for all who believe in Him. He continues to pray that we be one. And that prayer, like most prayers, is answered in ways that we do not expect. All over the world, and right here, right now, Christians are already becoming one where it matters – in their faith. That unity of Spirit challenges the world, even as Jesus challenged the world.

- It challenges the world to recognize God in Christ and to recognize Christ in us.
- It challenges the world to see that the power of love can transcend artificial distinction and difference.
- It challenges the world to see that unity can exist in diversity.
- And finally, it challenges the world to believe.