



Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador

The Anglican Church of Canada

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Dear Mayor Breen and Members of Council for the City of St. John's,

I write to you in my capacity as Bishop and Dean for the Anglican Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador. I regret that I was unable to meet with you in person earlier in July but I was at the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada in Vancouver. I have not spoken recently to the conversation around the proposed Diocesan Centre for Ministry because others have communicated eloquently on the matter and I have trusted in their wisdom and in the fairness of the process leading toward approval for this project.

My letter follows several other notable letters to you regarding our Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in St. John's written by Archdeacon Roger Whalen who is the Rector of the Cathedral, Mr. Paul Antle who is Chair of the Building Committee, Mr. Derek Sullivan who is Rector's Warden, and Dr. John Hewson, University Research Professor. I reference these letters because they were all copied to me and are factually comprehensive and sound in their argument. I shall not attempt to cover all of the ground so capably covered by the four writers from our Cathedral but I will write to you as Anglican Bishop for the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador.

In the Anglican tradition, a cathedral is a diocesan church containing the official seat for the bishop known as a *cathedra*, hence the name of the building, *cathedral*. Our Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is the "mother church" for the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador with approximately 30,000 identifiable members across 38 parishes and 80 active congregations covering all of the Avalon Peninsula and almost all of Labrador. A diocese is a grouping of parish churches overseen by a bishop. The recorded history of our Cathedral congregation in St. John's can be traced at least to 1699 when some worshippers petitioned the Bishop of London for a resident priest. There have been many church buildings on or near the site of the present Cathedral, which was severely damaged in the Great Fire of 1892. It took until 1905 before reconstruction to its present-day form was completed. The history of the Cathedral Parish of St. John the Baptist, the history of the City of St. John's, and the history of Newfoundland and Labrador have been intertwined for hundreds of years.

The current conversation around the future of our Cathedral and its associated properties was initiated by me about three years ago. As diocesan bishop, it was clear to me that the Cathedral congregation was being crushed by the burden of a gothic stone building requiring a relentless amount of maintenance and care. I should state that we would never construct such a building today but it is part of our heritage as Anglicans and it is therefore our responsibility to care for it and use it in ways appropriate to the 21st Century. Coupled with the challenge facing the Cathedral congregation with their place of worship was a parish hall that was several times larger than needed, highly inefficient to heat and maintain, and unable to be modernized for many reasons, not the least of which were serious issues with its foundation. Three years ago, I could see the Cathedral Parish tipping into financial insolvency because of its properties and something had to be done. I began a series of fresh conversations with the Cathedral leadership whereby the decision was made that the Diocese would assume

responsibility for the Cathedral Parish Hall (which is now conditionally sold) and we would all work toward the creation of a Diocesan Centre for Ministry combining the current Diocesan Synod Office on King's Bridge Road, the old Cathedral Parish Hall, and the current Cathedral Offices. It was decided that the new structure would be attached to the Cathedral, which is the current standard for churches so that worship, administration, fellowship, teaching and outreach are under one roof. The upgrade would see the blending of three separate buildings into a single structure that would meet modern standards of accessibility and inclusion, centrally located in downtown St. John's.

It is important for you to know that the Anglican Church has a remarkable history of opening its doors to those in need. Presently, the Diocesan Synod Office (the Bishop's Office) at 19 King's Bridge Road is at maximum capacity. It is at maximum capacity not just because of our own ministries and administration but because so many others have been invited in to share our space and provided with shelter and care and support at no charge. A few years ago, one of those clients came to us in great need and we gave them our boardroom. They were followed by another client and we gave them our chapel. Then another came and we remodeled storage space to provide for them. This year the Office of the Bishop welcomed our latest member to the family in the form of community gardens that are growing just outside my window. There is a waiting list of others wanting to avail of our hospitality. Clients have come to us through Eastern Health, the St. John's Status of Women Council, Home Again Furniture Bank, and Roots of Empathy. In fact, when our diocesan offices move to the Cathedral, I would like nothing better than to make available at no cost the rest of 19 King's Bridge Road to worthy and vital groups working for the care and protection of God's children in the City of St. John's. In Archdeacon Roger Whalen's letter to you, he drew your attention to an independent study of the Anglican Diocese just published – the Halo Canada report – which concluded that the Anglican Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador contributes outward to the community around it about \$22 million every year in ministry and support. [Halo Canada](#) The Diocesan Centre for Ministry proposed for the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is very much about continuing and deepening our ministry to all.

The concerns I have heard expressed include matters of architecture and design. I want you to know that the leadership given to this matter by Mr. Paul Antle and those working alongside him has been exceedingly sensitive to the heritage of the Cathedral building. We decided early on that we could not possibly compete with that astonishingly beautiful gothic structure but we could complement it with a design appropriate for today. Great care was taken so that the addition not diminish the beauty of the existing Cathedral but bring to it an attached structure that would be a home for the members of the Cathedral Parish who would ensure the maintenance and preservation of the Cathedral for generations to come. The Cathedral is not being demolished; it will continue to be supported and cared for by a passionate, dedicated and faithful congregation who serve and worship in that building. The new centre will better care for those people and enable them to carry out their mission to the community *and* to the Cathedral. As leaders of the City of St. John's, what more could you possibly ask then to have such a dedicated group of people caring for your Cathedral? You have a great responsibility for the Cathedral building but you also have a great responsibility for those wonderful people who call the Cathedral home. It seems to me that one point that has been sadly (and perhaps deliberately) missed by many commentators is that the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is a living community. It is not a museum, neither is it merely a monument to the past, it is a living community of faith. And while we must take care of the Cathedral building we must also take care of the family living within it.

You should also know that our Cathedral congregation is today one of our fastest-growing congregations in the Diocese. They are a diverse, generous, progressive, loving and welcoming family who are passionate about their faith and community-outreach, and formidable advocates for social justice. Did you see them at the Pride Parade this year? They are now leading our Diocese in so many good ways. But don't just take my word for it; drop by yourself some Sunday (or weekday) and meet them in person. As Councillors for the City of St. John's I ask you to support them and trust them and work with them for the well-being of this great city. The members of our Cathedral are citizens, voters and taxpayers like yourselves who also want to make our great city even greater.

Another concern expressed regarding the Diocesan Centre for Ministry centers on the possibility of human remains on the proposed site. I raised that same concern three years ago and all of the evidence presented to me since suggests very strongly that there are no human remains where we plan to build. The proposed construction site, much of which is on the present-day parking lot, incorporates the old boiler room which was previously excavated. The proposed construction site also includes the location of a large oil spill in the last century that was previously excavated. Reports from our Diocesan Archives and the Anglican Cemetery Committee state that many bodies were removed from the burial ground in the mid-19th century and relocated to our cemetery on Forest Road. Pictures taken during the reconstruction of the Cathedral in the late 19th Century show that the proposed construction site served as a debris field during the work. A series of test pits requested by me (under the supervision of an archeologist) all suggest strongly that there are no human remains in that ground. It is regretful that certain members of our public and social media have quoted inflated figures untethered from any evidence. Sensational headlines do not equal good journalism.

In conclusion, I ask you, the members of St. John's City Council, entrusted with the care of this great City of St. John's, to support your Cathedral of St. John the Baptist and the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador as we plan responsibly for our future. If the plan we have put before you to ensure the care and maintenance of the Cathedral for generations to come is not approved, we would like to invite you to meet with us to discuss a path forward for this worthwhile project. I will tell you that the Anglican Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador does not see another alternative. We do not seek to diminish anything of the past, neither do we seek to be disrespectful toward those who have gone before us. But you, more than anybody else in the City of St. John's should know the compelling and great human needs in our city and particularly in our downtown area. What we are proposing to you is a plan to care for everyone and in particular those who may have nobody else to speak on their behalf or to protect them. We propose to you a Cathedral that is home to all, a place of rich hospitality and kindness, a place of transformation where lives are changed for the better.

I know we all love the Downtown core of St. John's. The Anglican Church loved it *long before* it became the Downtown. And we intend to love it long into the future. Please join us in making that possible.

With my every blessing,

+*Geoffrey*



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