

The Bishop's Charge

To the 138th Synod of the Diocese of Fredericton

Fredericton, New Brunswick

November 5, 2022

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. *- Romans 8: 38-39*

I want to begin by saying thank you. We have travelled, and continue to travel along, a difficult road for the past two and a half years. COVID-19 has been draining for us all. It has moved many of the markers we have taken for granted both in daily life and the life of the Church. We have seen friends and family being unwell and in some cases relatives and those close to us have died.

Yet we have continued to worship together in different ways. We have supported each other through this time. We have prayed for each other and our communities. As restrictions have eased many congregations have sought ways in which we can meet the needs of those around us. I am grateful to you for this and am grateful to God for the Diocese I have been called to serve.

As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, we find ourselves in a changed landscape. It was changing before early 2020, but in some ways, though by no means all, things have accelerated during the last two years.

Last week we received numbers from Statistics Canada giving us the results of the 2021 Census's survey on religious belief in Canada.

The good news is that about 53% of Canadians identify as Christian; the bad news, that is down from 67% ten years before.

When we narrow that down into New Brunswick the numbers are challenging. 104,000 fewer New Brunswickers identify as Christian than was the case ten years ago, leaving a total of 512,645.

Of these, 35,205 identified as Anglican compared to 54,270 in 2011. These are big numbers, and we cannot easily drill down into them to establish causes. What we can say is the numbers of those who identify as Christian is in decline across Canada and in New Brunswick, and those identifying as Anglican reflect this.

We can dwell on these numbers and hope that they turn around, but we, the Church in the West, have been doing that for decades, with little success. What is the issue? I wish this were not true, but as I talk to people who do not worship with us or have done so and have

stopped, the message is relatively simple. They do not find the Church credible, because many see it as hypocritical, irrelevant, and lacking in compassion and grace. I am not solely talking about the Anglican Church; I am speaking of the “One holy Catholic and apostolic Church”.

Now let me be clear, in most cases this is not due to their interaction with local congregations and individual Christians. Most of the time those are positive experiences. Rather, it is the headlines people read about the failings of the Church that lead them to dismiss us; and crucially, by dismissing us God is dismissed, and thereby the love which God has for the whole of creation.

I have read every one of the 74 responses that you have made to the survey that was sent out from my office. Thank you for taking the time to respond. There are many good things which have been mentioned in them and once again I am grateful to God and to you for the ways in which we have been led over the last two and a half years.

That being said, I hear three main themes, each of which is concerning and real. These are: how do we get people back into the pews, how do we improve our finances and how do we keep our buildings running? They are not new issues, but perhaps for some of us they have been highlighted during the pandemic.

From my perspective I can add to this a shortage of clergy to place in parishes where finances would allow them to be placed. I only see this becoming more pronounced.

How are we being called to be church when it seems the survival of what we know and understand as church is at stake?

I have served in this diocese for 25 years and these have been themes which have been evident to a lesser or greater extent for the whole of this time. The church I first served, St. James Broad Street in the south end of Saint John, has long been closed. The good news there is that we have been able to repurpose the site, with help from community partners, as a place to house and support homeless youth. Formerly called Safe Harbour and now known as Beacon Cove, this may give us a clue about the future.

As your Bishop, part of my role is to pray, discern and lead. I have discovered over the last eight years this is no easy task and the pandemic has made it less so. As I have prayed, I have gone back again and again to three passages of scripture. These are where I find my hope. The first is from Psalm 121: 1- 4:

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

This passage calls us to have eyes of faith. As you know it is used in the Burial Office. It is to be an encouragement in times of despair. In ancient Israel the gods who distracted people from God were worshipped in the high places. The Psalmist tells the people it is not from

there that they will find help. They are to look beyond the hills to the creator, who made heaven and earth and who does not sleep.

This is the God who keeps Israel, but as their history unfolded, it was perhaps not in the way that Israel hoped to be kept.

When we are fearful for ourselves, St. Paul reminds us in Romans 8: 38 -39:

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is nothing that can separate anyone from the love of God in Christ and that is the message which we are to join God in demonstrating as it is made known to the whole creation.

When we are fearful for the Church, we have the words of Jesus himself (from Matthew 16: 18):

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

The following chart shows us what is happening in the Anglican Communion across the world. Of course, the North American picture is not pretty, but the gates of hell are not prevailing against God's Church, Anglican or otherwise. The truth is the growth is not happening here where we would like to see it.

Global Anglicanism, 1970 to 2015

	1970	2015
Africa	7,718,000	56,947,000
Asia	358,000	891,000
Europe	29,367,000	24,922,000
North America	4,395,000	2,549,000
Latin America	775,000	929,000
Oceania	4,781,000	4,533,000
Global Total	47,394,000	90,771,000

The World Christian Database, compiled by Gina Zurlo and Todd Johnson of the Center for the Study of Worldwide Christianity, Gordon-Conwell University.

Over the years I have been asked to produce a diocesan plan for growth. I have resisted this because in my experience top-down plans do not work. During my time as bishop, we have had a number of initiatives, which have included things such as BELLS, and they have taken

root in some places and not in others. The idea behind these things has been to try to deepen our faith as we seek to be disciples of Jesus.

At our last Synod it was agreed that each parish would produce a Mission Action Plan. This initiative was to be locally based, but unfortunately the pandemic reduced our ability to undertake the making of such plans, though to do so now could form a start point for a way forward.

So, what are we to do? How are we to discern the will of God for us as the Anglican Church in New Brunswick as we move forward from here?

First, we have to recognize the nature of the problem. For a multitude of reasons our society has been turning away from God, and to a greater extent God's Church, for more than fifty years. No matter what has been tried through programs, plans and initiatives, this has not been reversed. It is time to question and discern if what we have and are holding on to is helping us become what God wants us to be. It seems that when we try to hold on to what we have, it trickles through our fingers like water.

Now we stand at a crisis and our only alternative is to seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon him while he is near – and he is near.

If we can recognize the truth of our situation and accept it, then perhaps we can allow God to do something about it.

As with all journeys the first step is the hardest. I admit that I hardly understand what I am saying here, but we have to engage deeply both individually and corporately with the mystery who is God. God who created, sustains and fills creation. God whose love, grace and mercy stretches beyond the Church to the whole of creation. God, who out of generosity loves to bless, but also suffers with us all as creation groans, as in the pains of childbirth waiting for the children of God to be revealed.

Recently, Debbie and I were in Toronto, as we passed St. Paul's Bloor Street we were stopped by this sculpture "When I was a Stranger"; words of Jesus from Matthew 25.

God Incarnate, Jesus, invites us to sit with him and to walk with him into the depths of God. Jesus says to us as he said to his disciples "Follow me". Before we follow, we may have to sit awhile, to discover where we are being led.

There are many ways to do this. Using Lectio Divina in our daily prayers where we leave silence for God to speak or using "A Disciple's Prayer Book". There are multiple resources out there. But here is the thing: we have to do this corporately as well as individually. We are being called to discern God together.

I know this does not sound like us. I know that if I were sitting listening to me I would say, "David, you are being ridiculous. I don't have time for this. Give me something to do, some practical action to take".

My reply to me is this, “Unless I can understand even a little more about God and the way he loves and suffers for his creation, I will never understand God’s mission in God’s world”. Furthermore, unless I come to understand God’s mission, even a little more, I will not understand how we, the Church, are to reflect God in the world; and thereby never know what God is calling us to do.

I am now going to enter onto dangerous ground, because I am going to give us things to consider as we seek to engage with God. The problem is that people like me will jump to these without taking the necessary time to discern. What we have to do is to ask: as we follow Jesus, the image of the invisible God, into discerning more of the character of God, is what are God’s desires for the mission and ministry of the Church in advancing the Kingdom?

In other words, how are we being called to reflect the image of God in our parishes and diocese? But before that, are these hints, that I think I am hearing and am going to point to now, even correct? What needs to be added or taken away?

Whatever we do has to be locally discerned. This means that we are to make significant time individually and corporately outside Sunday worship to pray and listen to God and each other. If you need my help to do this, or another facilitator, it can be arranged.

As we do this, we remember our Anglican roots. These have been discerned and acted upon over centuries. Our mission and ministry are summed up in these few words “the cure of souls”. Seeking healing, wholeness, and peace for ourselves and the communities we are called to serve.

More recently the Church has discerned the following as flowing from the “cure of souls”:

The Five Marks of Mission:

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
3. To respond to human need by loving service.
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

How do these reflect the character of God and how do we move forward on some of them locally both across the diocese and in the different parts of our province?

Finally, I hope that what you have understood from my many words today is that we as the Anglican Diocese of Fredericton, as with the Church as a whole, are being called into a new place. We do not really understand what that means. We have to look beyond ourselves

into the mystery of God and begin to more fully understand how God sees things and how God wants us to work with him to draw all things unto himself.

This will lead us in many directions, and I want to give us some guideposts which I believe we need to **know** the answers to as we reflect individually, as Synod, and in our parishes over the coming weeks and months.

- What do we have that sustains us and what impedes us?
- Where are we being called to take risks and to experiment?
- How do we continue to engage with the communities we are called to serve?
- How do we continue to grow as disciples of Christ?

These guideposts have to be applied to all areas of our life together. It means that we must look at all aspects of the diocese, our parishes, our synod, our governance, everything.

The Church has two essential tasks: to worship God and to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Our task, as it has been throughout the history of the Church is to discern how these things are to be done for the Glory of God, that others may see God's glory and believe. I am calling upon us to take the risk of walking by faith and not by sight.