

Living Hope: Our Identity and Mission in Christ, Continued . . .

**“Yielding to the Life of the Holy Spirit”
2021**

Annual Synod, May

Bishop's Charge, Monday morning

Stewardship of our Inherited resources in a Liminal Time.

In this time, perhaps any time, the ministry of a bishop is to receive the Holy Spirit, and to stir up the grace of God, without fear. Ours is spiritual work, in service to Christ, who loves us into loving the world, *by the power of* that same Spirit.

I don't want to lose sight of the fact that our work together is spiritual work. As I was saying yesterday, spiritual work happens in physical, fleshly, people and places. How can we open ourselves to the leading of God when it comes to the spiritual use of our assets and our operations?

First, I think, we do this by being brutally honest with ourselves about some of the biggest challenges.

1. Physical Structures: property and buildings.

What percentage of your overall budget goes to the maintenance of your church buildings? We live in Canada, we need a roof, walls, windows, plumbing, electrical, and heat. Some of our communities have inherited a building already paid for, others have mortgages, all have maintenance. We have some serious challenges in meeting the demands of these buildings with declining budgets. A lot of us face huge barriers because of the cost of our buildings.

This year alone, the insurance increases on those buildings—the *increase* to the premiums alone—took another \$625K out of the system across our diocese (on average, a 92% increase). Altogether, our buildings are insured for over \$440M. This assumes that we would replace our buildings just as they are, should there be a total loss. How many of you would actually do that? I love, love, love church buildings, they are holy and often beautiful. But we don't need \$440M worth of them—for ourselves. Because there is only one insurance company left who will sell us insurance, we are setting up a task force to do the research and to negotiate some new options. There are options, even with this one company. Please stay tuned.

This points to a critical issue. These buildings were not built to weigh us down and put us out of business. They were built to serve communities.

Twenty-five years ago, we had 250 congregations. Now we have about 170. That is down about a third. Several groups that study this stuff anticipate that one-third of existing churches in Canada will close over the next ten years. Let's say it's not quite that bad, and we are left with 125 church buildings in 2031, when I'm about to retire – about half of what we had when I was first ordained.

Even then, if you took a person who was gripped by the Holy Spirit and trained in discipleship and ministry, and you said, “here you go, we want you to be the Anglican Christian presence in Southwestern Ontario, and you can have these 125 buildings, and these 25,000 or so Christians, and this bit of money in trusts and all that—to start a diocese—she or he would say, “Alleluia! The LORD provides!”

Ask any church planter, that's a seriously good start. That's not building from scratch. That's a golden opportunity. Right now, we have 30 % more human and physical assets than that scenario. That's a platinum opportunity. Not to mention that—the power of the Holy Spirit wants to clothe us with power from on high!

We've got to be smart with our physical resources. Many of these are very underutilized, because we are understandably *tired*. So, how can our home, our church building, become a community hub again? We will have to sacrifice and be generous. But we can do it. We have the opportunity to determine what we will leave as an inheritance.

Sometimes we behave as though there will be nobody around in ten years and we'll just shut out the lights. Maybe that will happen in a few places, but not in most of them. Because of population shifts will continue to shift, and people will continue to be drawn to Christ, and humans will always need healthy spiritual communities, and even now there are young people who fully expect to be still be the church in 2050 and 2060.

We can do this. We have assets. They are God-given. Maybe this time of challenge will also liberate us for something new in these our communities.

By this time next year, I expect that the Diocesan Council and I will have found a way forward with policies, guidelines, resources, and training to support you in preserving, restoring, and repurposing our physical assets to serve our neighbourhoods in the name of Christ for generations to come. This will be your decision. I want to see church communities thrive, not close. So, I'll do everything in my power to make sure we are looking at all of the options. There are resources out there and we will bring some of them together for you over the next year or so.

Another challenge and opportunity may be found in taking a close look at our,

2. Organizational Structures: the people and processes that make it happen, or not.

In the many attempts I've made, over the years, to have a big strategy for reorganizing myself, my workplace, or my community, I've repeatedly learned the truth that management guru Peter Drucker made famous, "culture eats

strategy for breakfast.” The diocese of Huron has a culture, is a culture, of sorts. Culture is simply the ideas, values, customs, patterns, and social behaviour of a particular people or society. It’s our habits, it’s our automatic ways of being, and it seems like the most natural things in the world—unless you’ve come from another culture. Part of the reason we’ve been able to be resilient in the pandemic is that part of our culture is very healthy and good. It serves us well.

Parts of it do not serve us well, however, and it’s hard to see what’s what. Therefore, we will have to experiment with some things, try them differently, experiment, assess it after a while and see if it’s better. If it is, great, keep going. If it’s not, try something else. This will create some discomfort and some conflict, but we can embrace that.

By this time next year, we will have had a close look at the following things to see if the current arrangement still serves us well: Diocesan Council, the committee structures, vocational discernment and formation, Deaneries and Archdeaconries, and the ways in which we exercise and share episcopal ministry.

In other words, we’re going to take a close look at how to make sure that our leadership groups and our leadership positions, starting with mine, can be set up to carefully complement the wonderful diversity of gifts that God has provided in the people of this church. We are looking for a more coordinated, complementary, collaborative approach. I hope that you’ll be part of the conversation.

Every organization has structures AND dynamics. They work together. What about the dynamics, the movement, the activity that these structures intend to support? Here, I’d like to comment on the four overarching priorities I laid out last September. These describe our activity, our dynamics, the forces that provide movement.

Since September we have aspired to be a more learning church, a more just church, a more diverse church, and a church open to every kind of Resurrection “newness”.

a learning church,

A disciple is a pupil of Jesus, learning of him and living in him. Well, I’m delighted to say that we are a church eager to learn. There has been a marked increase in study groups, workshops, speaker series, podcasts, reading groups, listening groups, EFM groups, and all kinds of learning and catechetical formation. Part of the reason is that we were restricted from getting together so we embraced digital media which, as it turns out for many of us, made participation easier.

There is still a very important place for gathering to learn in-person and in-community, but this has been a huge gift that will supplement what we have always done to support learning and formation. In the next year, we hope to provide more content, accessibility, pathways, and programs for being a continuously learning church. Stay curious about Christ, my friends!

a just church,

Justice, in our religious tradition, is “to make right”, to put right. We seek to be a church that makes wrongs right and avoids injustice in the first place. What does God’s justice look like when it happens? What does it look like in the lives of faithful people? A just church prioritizes relationships and lives in right relationship with God, one another, and the natural creation.

Here, I would like to point to the work being done to learn and do more about dismantling racism, reconciliation with indigenous peoples, creation care, addressing economic injustices, equitable vaccine distribution, refugee sponsorship, and so on. These things can become more central for more of us and we can follow those in our churches who have been up to their elbows in

the work for decades. A special thanks for the leadership given by the Justice League of Huron, the Refugee committee, and many the other justice-seeking teams and people in our church.

We also will have to exponentially ramp up our response to the climate emergency. When we can circulate again in relative safety, our eyes cannot veer from the two things that threaten us more than this coronavirus: inequality and environment degradation. By this time next year, we will have worked through ways to lead our communities in making a real, measurable difference in these areas. The work has begun and it continues and there will some updates about all of this work as we go, through videos and other means of communication. I look forward to that work.

I also look forward to continuing to work with Indigenous Anglicans as we partner in new and creative ways to be together in Christ. This is something Archdeacon Rosalyn Elm and I will be launching into more deeply both on-line and in-person this September. We seek God's justice together.

a diverse church,

In the feedback from last Synod and in the time since, this was the area where I seemed to cause the most confusion. It may have also revealed that not everyone wants diversity in the church. Some organizations, some churches, are affinity groups—based on shared characteristics and interests. We are drawn to people who are similar to us, who like the same things. That's ok, it's often good. It just can't be all that we do. In some locations, it's just the demographic reality that there is little diversity in the population. But even that will change soon.

I still maintain that if we want to see a beauty that we've never seen before in our churches, then we should foster a more diverse membership. The future of Canada is going to be multi-traditioned, multi-cultured, multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-gendered—and so needs to be the future of the Anglican Church.

Maybe “unity in diversity” will become our motto someday, when we are a more radically hospitable church, joyfully embracing difference and diversity.

a “new” church,

In a liminal season like this one, we ready ourselves for new beginnings. Like the new beginnings we see in the *Acts of the Apostles*. A new beginning is usually a very satisfying reorientation, a sense that we finally found a new equilibrium, and a renewed sense of identity and mission starts to come better into focus. I don’t know if this will happen over the next few years or over the next few decades, but I believe it will come.

For those who love the idea of everything becoming new, this is fun. For those who dread it and are concerned for what will be lost, this is not fun. The “new” I’m referring to here is neither of those, merely.

This is the deepest, truest, form of “new” possible. The kind that is good news for all. It is the kind of “new” that we hear described in the creation stories. It is the kind of new that what experience at the empty tomb of Jesus. Sheer possibility. That is what our church is built upon. Faith in the possibility of a new creation, a new creation that is stretching out before us and that the Holy Spirit of God promises to lead us into. The whole history of the people of God has included liminal times like this. God always led them through—each and every time—to the new thing promised.

Therefore, we embrace it and continue to ask, *in every decision, every grief, every opportunity, “could this newness be the work of God? Is this a possible place where God’s new creation may take root?”*

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal life,
look favorably on your whole church, that wonderful and sacred mystery.
By the effectual working of your providence,
carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation.
Let the whole world see and know
that things which were cast down are being raised up,
and things which had grown old are being made new,
and that all things are being brought to their perfection
by Him through whom all things were made,
your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.