

Assisting Bishop's Charge to the Assembly of the Territory of the People
Anglican Church
May 27, 2022
The Right Rev. Jane Alexander

We celebrate the opening of this Assembly during Ascensiontide, the 10 days between Christ's Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost. The ten days between these festivals are days of waiting, a time for reflection, a time to stop, to pray, to wait and to wonder. I imagine the disciples at this moment after Jesus' ascension felt confused, alone, lost, were wondering what was going to happen next, were wondering if this was the end or just a beginning as Jesus had promised. And that is us here at Assembly – where are we now and where are we going? Perfect!

In this charge I will tell you how things look to me in the Territory of the People right now, and pose us some questions to consider during our time together. I want to begin by saying what a privilege it has been to be your Assisting Bishop since February and I thank Archbishop Lynne with all my heart for the opportunity, and I thank each of you for making me so welcome. People have a great attachment to the land here. And after just a few months I think I am beginning to understand it, I am blown away by the beauty of this place. I completely understand the longing of all those displaced by fire and flood to come home (more on that later).

Thank you so much to all of you, lay and ordained, who have led with such grace and love over the last years of the pandemic, doing things in new ways, surfing the waves of restrictions, and in all things continuing to love and care for the people of God. I am very aware the pandemic is not over as we look around... we know we are missing a lot of people many of whom are ill. So we pray for those who are unable to be with us for these days of listening and dreaming.

Before we look closely at the Territory of the People, and because of the week and year it has been, I would like to begin with some words on children. Since the last Assembly we were rocked by the discovery (or should I say confirmation) of 215 graves in Kamloops and 93 in Williams Lake at former residential schools, and we know there are more to come. We have heard of children being shot and killed in the US this week while they were at Robb elementary school in South Texas. It seems to me we need to stop and take a moment right here, right now, to acknowledge that children are precious gifts of God who need to be honoured and loved and safeguarded, and that we dishonour the image of the Creator when children are taken away, lost, mistreated or killed. So let us stop for a moment and pray:

Creator
God of love and justice,
Comforter of those who mourn,

Since we were last together, we have learned of more Indigenous children lost, more children who never returned to their families from schools they should never have been forced to attend in the first place. This news is devastating.

We pray for healing for the children's families and communities, who suffer with pain no one should ever have to bear.

We acknowledge the actions of your church, our complicity in running residential schools and taking children from their families.

We weep and we repent for the pain and ongoing harm we have caused, and ask for the will and wisdom to act to end that harm.

Comforter God, we pray for healing in the communities and families of all who experienced residential schools, comfort for all those grieving, and strength for all to pursue reconciliation¹.

In this troubled world we lift up to you other children lost to the violence of this world. Especially remembering those lost to war and persecution and to gun violence.

Help us Creator to value each precious life.

Help us to speak up, even if our voices shake.

Comforter God,

we pray for healing in the families, schools and communities of all children who died in Texas, comfort for all those grieving, and strength for those who can change laws to change this trajectory of grief and violence.

AMEN

As we turn now and look at the work of the church here in 2022 and into the future, I have to say that I am encouraged by your very presence here this evening; you are a group of people who care about the church and its mission. A great preacher William Willimon said to his congregation that "You are here, (in church) not because you are searching but because you have been sought, called, summoned. You are here because God has reached in, grabbed you, put you here, enticed, wooed, allured you here. The long search is over. You have been found. This is the good news." I really agree with him, we have been caught, and now it is our turn to share the good news. Our theme for our Assembly is *Behold I am doing a new thing: Come and see*.

As I travel around the Territory of the People, I think you do not always know one another very well, which makes it hard for us to understand the different contexts in which we minister. Therefore, at this assembly there is **extra time** allocated for table discussions and meal fellowship to hear one another's stories and to pray together.

I am going to warn you that some of the things I will say in this charge tonight are not easy to hear. But I believe that in order to move forward we have to be really realistic about where we are right now and where we believe God is calling us to go. So, I ask you to summon up some courage right now to look with me at how things stand.

¹ Adapted from Presbyterian Church of Canada May 2021 Prayer for children whose graves were found in Kamloops

At the moment we are, for the most part, a church in a holding or even declining pattern in some parishes here in the Territory. The pandemic has meant that our attention has been focused on pastoral care and on some of our existing food and social support programs, and that is how it should be. However, now we are at a fork in the road, a time of decision making about what the future will be.

— We have very few children in our parishes and fewer youth.

— We have few people coming forward for ordination, baptism or confirmation.

— Our clergy community is small and overstretched and we have difficulty in attracting new leaders to the Territory.

Now stay with me here, we have to look and ask hard questions. Whether we like it or not the time to act is right now. Do not look down hearted please; I ask you to dig really deep and find the courage to say “What a great opportunity” “What a chance for growth.” You see, I believe we are in a time of great opportunity, we have the freedom to let go of all the things that have not worked and to look ahead.

I know things can turn around. I am going to tell you some great stories about places where I have seen hope and growth and we will hear more of these over the course of Assembly. But what we need right now is a move in our thinking, our way of understanding one another that says ‘God has great plans for our communities’. We cannot ‘decide’ to be small and to stay that way because it is what makes us feel comfortable. Christ does not call us to be comfortable.

The geographical places we live are varied across our communities, with many first nations, rural and urban settings and so on. If we look at two main urban areas I have to tell you there is such opportunity for growth and that fills me with excitement. Kamloops has around 100,000 people and keeps growing with ever greater numbers of young families, children and youth. Prince George has about 85,000 people, according to the last census. Only 15% of the population there is over 65, 17% are under 14 and 68% are between 14 and 64 what a great opportunity! In the Cariboo Regional District the population is more spread out and there are pockets of growing aging population especially in the south of the district – but again that brings its own opportunities for the focused ministry of the church. The population of Ashcroft grew by 7% in the last five years. Logan Lake grew by 13% in those same 5 years (we need to get back there).

Why am I sharing these somewhat dry statistics with you? Well, if the population was staying the same and not changing I guess you could try and make the point that the church doesn’t need to change. But with growth in population and the presence of big unchurched groups of people, well, that has opportunity written all over it. The percentage of people who have never ever been to church and who don’t know anything about Jesus is growing all over the world. There is a call on the church to get out there and show by word and by deed what Jesus is all about and to invite folk to get to know Jesus and Jesus’ family. Can we invite people to come and meet Christ, not just once but over and over again? Think with me for a moment about Jesus’ ministry. He was always on the move. Always going out and looking

for people, always visiting new places, inviting others into community. As Christians we model our ministry upon that of Jesus.

We have to go to where the people are. Take as your inspiration the travelling communion set – one of the treasures of the church in this area, which is at the front of the hall throughout our Assembly. From about 1915 it was made to be fitted to the saddle of a horse to take the sacrament out to the people. Are we still willing to go? Because of course, that is the call to the church to go from Jerusalem to Samaria to the ends of the earth, to Barriere, to Lillooet, to Quesnel.

I am under no illusions that this is always easy. So, we know some people will look at a church which is trying to be transparent, a church which shows itself as being full of flawed people and say ‘why do I want to be part of that?’ And yet, there is so much more to the church, so much more to Jesus. And we need to be able to voice our faith and our hope. No one automatically knows how to do this. I am hoping to bring **Michael Harvey to the Territory in the Fall** to visit across our communities to equip us to invite and look for growth.

I am also going to ask you to set growth goals, not just for worship but for Bible study, fellowship events, prayer groups etc. And I am going to ask you for what may seem an outrageous goal of 10% growth over the next 2 years. Before anyone thinks that’s too big – remember if you currently have 10 people in church or taking part in an activity I am only asking for 1 more. I believe we can do this. And we will do it by making it a priority and by developing a culture of invitation across every aspect of church life.

We as a church need to keep doing the things that work, but also embrace new ways of reaching out. We have a massive amount of work to do when it comes to children and young families. Let me stress though, I am talking about discipleship here. **The #1 reason for reaching out to youth and children is for them to come to know Jesus.** It’s not about making sure we replace our eldest members with newer ones. We are not looking to maintenance, it is about discipleship. This is our task across all age groups but it is especially important with children and youth. I hope to bring in a resource person to give some **workshops on Messy Church** in each of the Territory regions. If you are not sure how urgent this is, I would say there are hardly any children in our churches and we could not find youth delegates for Assembly. Think about that for a moment... we have to do something, and we have to do it now.

We must also make some decisions about how we continue to be the church in rural communities that can no longer afford full, or even half-time priestly ministry. The size of the Territory means we will need to subsidize ministry in certain areas because it is not feasible to have clergy shared across vast distances. Because of the generosity of people who have gone before us in the church we have the resources to do this. It is time to release our treasure to places **with the potential for growth**. Do not be disheartened, the fragility of the rural church is known far and wide, listen to this recent research finding:

In many rural communities, congregations have already become quite small and are likely to be fragile. There are five marks of a fragile church:

1. financial pressure and congregational anxiety about dwindling resources;
2. actual or feared inability to replace church officers;
3. lack of time and energy among clergy to start new things;
4. a lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them;
5. and single-figure congregations with an age profile of 75 and above ²

Naming these things means we are looking clearly at the challenges before us, and Rural communities have specific challenges. The shape of our rural communities is very varied depending on agricultural situations, economic, and industry variables. There are communities which are dying and ones which are reinventing themselves.

Climate challenges have led to some areas of devastation, and in some of those places like Lytton, rebuilding is very slow. This leads us to ask of the church what is our role, our presence now, and what will it be in the future? You are blessed that in areas of the greatest devastation the church has been right there on the ground with the people, showing we are in this for the long haul. How do we make sure we stay? Because of the unique experiences of climate-based change here in the Territory do we have something to say, to teach to the wider church? I think we do.

We have benefitted greatly from ecumenical partnerships across the Territory which bring a shared vision for ministry to a particular area. Ecumenical partnerships are part of the flavour of the Territory but in addition, three Anglican parishes in Prince George and Quesnel have done incredible work in identifying and encouraging the gifts of their congregations, and in developing a possible new model for ministry. This past season they have been asking themselves hard questions under the facilitation of Rev. Canon Richard Lesueur as to what the future holds. It has not been an easy process and it is not finished, but they are necessary conversations. I wonder **what are the necessary conversations you need in your parish communities?** In addition to ecumenical partnerships, we also have a wonderful interfaith ministry in Prince George out of St. Michael's church. I was hoping Dr Marie Hay would be able to tell us more about it, but sadly she was diagnosed with Covid on Thursday and is unable to be with us, but please do ask the other representatives from Prince George to tell you more.

Financially, we know that some parts of our Territory have extraordinarily high housing costs. We are a part of the Council of the North dioceses and territories across the Anglican church of Canada and these places have clergy stipend scales lower than in some other parts of the church. Some of you may not know that. I am reminding you of it now because it helps to explain some of the difficulties of attracting clergy to this area.

² S. Anne Lawson (2019) Research Report: The Marks of the Fragile Rural Church. Rural Theology, 17 (1), 51-57.

Stipend is lower, housing is higher and we have very few full-time positions. Therefore, you can see how that makes recruitment challenging.

Please **pray** as we continue to look for a Dean in Kamloops and a Rector in Prince George. So yes, we have challenges. But God says “Behold I am doing a new thing”. Are we looking for it? Are we building on it?

In some places the closure of a church would have a congregation throwing their hands in the air and saying that everything is over. But here in the Territory in Merritt the people of St. Michael’s said, we are still here. The ministry of the Soup Bowl of the Merritt Bread Basket which operates out of the church hall, has continued to reach upwards of 70 families each week during the pandemic. I heard from Rev. Isabel this week that that number is creeping closer to 100.

In some places losing homes, possessions and church buildings would make a community throw up their hands and say “we are done” but speak to Angus, and Ursula, Amy, Pauline and Ernie and Isabel about what that has looked like in Lytton, in Merritt and out along the Nicola valley. We are going to hear too about the wonderful support of other parts of the Anglican Church of Canada through the **PWRDF** in raising funds for flood and fire relief. Hundreds of people have been helped, hundreds. Rev. Angus and Rev. Isabel will tell us more later during Assembly. The message to the communities is that we are still here, we are walking this tough road with you.

Across the Territory I have seen terrific examples of ministry to those most in need, through thrift stores such as in the North Thompson Ecumenical Shared Ministry, and community closets like the one in St. Timothy’s Hundred Mile House, soup ministry like that in St. Albans, Ashcroft. God is calling new things too in this area with a proposed ministry in St. Peter’s, Williams Lake.

One of my favourite passages of scripture is this one from Matthew 25:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Across the Territory you see those who are hungry, thirsty, sick or troubled and you do something about it. That’s important, because now more than ever, people want to know what the church is about. We need to not be shy about sharing the reason for the work and ministry that we do. Jesus. He’s the reason.

In some places in the Canadian church there is incredible difficulty in getting people to come forward for lay leadership, but here in the Territory you have about 40 Lay ministers of word and

sacrament. What a blessing! I believe that over the next year it is time to unpack that ministry a little more – especially in light of the need to be outside inviting people into community.

I also believe that more than a few of these folk have a call to ordained ministry too. It is my hope that now that we are able to gather in person, we will offer a **study retreat** for our Lay ministers this Fall. It's about helping people to discover who they are in Christ through relational ministry. We need to train and equip leaders and I believe we need to do it now.

I have said we have major challenges and indeed we do, but as we end our time together this weekend what are we going to be doing? Well, God-willing, we will have ordained a new priest Linda, we will have installed 3 new Pastoral Elders Ursula, Pauline and Ernie. We will have set our faces to the dawn and said 'we are here, we are not going anywhere, so give us your vision O Lord.' In Ashcroft Linda will build on the amazing ministry that has been there before, but it is my fervent prayer and hope that with additional funds recently released for ministry, we will be able to **build** this position to at least half time so Linda and the whole congregation can look at other opportunities that are starting to appear.

We have an incredible blessing in the Territory of the People through the ministry fund. You will have noted from JoAnn Hinter's report in your package how we need to do some work on the ministry committee. That is in hand. The other thing in hand is a resolution going to the Coordinating Council from Administration Committee to release about \$1million dollars for ministry development in the Territory leaving \$850,000 in the fund (which incidentally is the original amount from the sale of the Cleopas property). When the trust was established in 2008 it was for the Administration and Finance Committee to prepare terms of reference and criteria for the receipt and disbursement of income from the Trust for approval by the Coordinating Council. Therefore, the Administration Committee is working on new criteria for Coordinating Council should they approve the change. As I said earlier this evening we are in a period in the Territory when we must invest in the future for our parish communities, and in particular, our leadership.

At the present time the Fund has been extraordinarily well stewarded and is approaching \$2 million dollars. Currently the fund allocates up to \$35,000 per year which comes from the interest earned. This amount is not enough to staff new ministries or provide enough ongoing support to parish ministries to allow them to get well rooted and financially independent. Administration Committee believes it is time to commit to a program of growth for the future, and this will require us to use some of the abundance this fund has provided over and above that \$35,000.

In the Territory it is my hope for the bishop and the pastoral elders to have **regular meetings every couple of months for prayer** and to ensure we are walking a good road to reconciliation. It is my hope we will be able to invite some younger clergy into curacy positions to learn from the clergy and pastoral elders as we look to the next few years. It is my dream that a person from this land, this community, will hear God calling them to ordained ministry.

We will also build on the relationship with Rev. Dr. Ray Aldred at Vancouver School of Theology. **Ray will come to the Territory in June** for a series of listening circles.

So you see, for the continued life and health of the Territory of the People, we must make a plan. A plan of action if you like, that will look at existing parishes which are healthy; reboots of existing ministry that is under-equipped; fresh expressions of church; messy churches; and vibrant Chaplaincies in Universities, colleges, hospitals and extended care centres. Whatever it is, we must do everything the very best that we can. One size will not fit all, it never has and it never will, but we must be sure that what we offer to God through our ministry in the church is our very best. Which of course is leading you all to think, yes, but Bishop Jane it is the Bishop's job to help strike direction and lead into new things. Indeed it is. And therefore one of the questions to be considered before the end of Assembly is this - **Are we ready to ask the Metropolitan for permission to have an episcopal election for a bishop who will lead the Territory forward into this new time?** In order to answer that question, we need to look at our capacity for ministry. Also, as the Territory of the People how would you like to see the election process unfold? does the existing way work here? does it need tweaking? what are your thoughts? But the bottom line is do you want to grow as the church here in this place?

I am aware the time is moving on and I could talk to you of so many more things I have seen, of Peace and Interfaith ministry, of Victor our incredible hospital chaplain and his work during Covid, of parishes sharing their gifts and treasures with other parishes, of university ministry, of parishes making hard decisions about their buildings. However, I do not need to do that because you are all going to be talking to one another about those things.

So let us close with prayer,

A Prayer for the Power of the Spirit among the People of God

God of all power and love,
we give thanks for your unfailing presence
and the hope you provide in times of uncertainty and loss.
Send your Holy Spirit to enkindle in us your holy fire.
Revive us to live as Christ's body in the world:
a people who pray, worship, learn,
break bread, share life, heal neighbours,
bear good news, seek justice, rest and grow in the Spirit.
Wherever and however we gather,
unite us in common prayer and send us in common mission,
that we and the whole creation might be restored and renewed,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*