

Bishop's Charge to Synod

November 20, 2009

In Gary Nicolosi's article, "Rethinking How we Do Church" in the September issue of the Anglican Journal, one statement leaps off the page. It is a reality check that we all need to hear: "The Anglican Church of Canada has lost more than half of its membership in the past 50 years." A recent survey conducted across a third or more of the Dioceses in Canada offers us a more current and just as startling picture of our rate of decline in the last eight years: Since 2001, in those Dioceses surveyed, the total number of identifiable givers has dropped by 12%, the number of parish members has declined by 19% and Baptisms and Confirmations are down 26%.



If we are honest, there isn't anything here that we didn't already know. We have seen the signs of declining church membership and church attendance in many of our parishes for some time. Some factors that have led to this decline are culturally beyond our control and we need to stop beating ourselves up about the things we cannot change. Other things we can and must address, but where do we begin and how do we recapture a sense of direction?

A week from tomorrow we enter, once again, the season of Advent. We will gather in churches across the Diocese and share in the act of gazing upon the light of a single Advent candle, a reminder to us of who we are and what we have been made in our baptisms. As that flame burns in our midst, our hearts also burn with longing for signs of hope for the future. We gather as people who continue to walk in the darkness of this age and cry out for the blessings of justice, freedom and peace that is the promise of God to God's people. One candle for hope.

Many, probably most of us will sing this hymn as we gather together on that day:

O Come, O Come Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel.
That mourns in lowly exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O Come, Desire of nations, bind
in one the hearts of humankind;
O bid our bitter conflict cease,
And be for us our Prince of Peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel

The mystery of the coming Advent season is found not only in the fact that Christ has come but that Christ is mysteriously still coming and always coming. Christ comes not only in cosmic

splendour to renew the face of the earth but also in quiet persistence to renew the heart of each and every one of us, over and over again. I wonder whether we are *truly* ready or willing to open our hearts, our lives, our parishes and our Diocese to this great Advent mystery. I wonder!



“O Come Emmanuel, come O God and be with us.” Ready or not, this was my prayer and your prayer some twenty months ago as we gathered in the Cathedral for the service of installation and I believe that that prayer and the way in which it has been so dramatically answered has launched us on a journey of monumental proportions.

We have boldly taken a leap of faith to engage in a comprehensive and painstaking process of visioning and discerning that has called us to meet, head on, the challenges that we face. That process has strengthened us and given us the courage to dream and plan for a church and a ministry that is transformed and renewed -- a church that bears more effective witness to the glory of Christ's coming.

My year began dramatically, with a personal meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and it seems to me that every month – sometimes it has felt like every week – since, has brought its share of difficult decisions and important steps forward. 2009 has, without a doubt, been the most exhilarating and demanding year of my time in ordained ministry.

On September 1st of this year we took one of those important steps on the long road that we have travelled in dealing with issues of human sexuality and I am grateful to all those who have seen that journey through to this important moment in the life of our Diocese. At the same time, I am grateful to those among us who are in disagreement over the issue of same-sex blessings but continue to honour our communion in the Lord Jesus Christ and remain within the diocesan household.

Perhaps the most dramatic sign of the Advent promise of Emmanuel, God with us, is the gift that we now have in the form of our Diocesan Vision. At the very centre of this Vision is a strong desire to follow the way of Jesus passionately. The Vision calls us to offer people within our church communities a life-changing encounter with God and to allow that encounter to strengthen us for the work of transforming our world. Two phrases that have been with us from the early stages of this discernment process remain at the heart of the future we have envisioned together: “the pursuit of excellence in ministry” and “the status quo is not an option.”

Over the past two months I have been traveling around the Diocese telling the story of how my own vision for my episcopal ministry has evolved and of how that story has served as a springboard for the work of gathering people together. In these gatherings we have shared our stories and we have shared our hopes and dreams for the future. This work of allowing a Diocesan Vision to evolve, and the subsequent Vision presentations in which I have been engaged, have enabled us to create a common space to listen carefully to the voice of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The response to the Bishop's Visioning sessions has been absolutely overwhelming!

Here are some of the things we have heard so far:

- One parish is reaching out to the community with the use of their beautiful new butterfly garden. Windows have been placed on the front doors of the church building so that people can

see in during worship. The coffee pot is always on in the hall for anyone who would just like to drop in.

- There at least three church gatherings in a Pub location and many other initiatives are being undertaken to serve as a bridge between ourselves and society.
- Hot chocolate is being offered in one church for families and children while they wait for the school bus each morning.
- In so many of our parishes outreach and justice-making is not just an add-on! We are offering breakfast and out of the cold programs and we are identifying many other innovative ways of addressing the physical needs and the spiritual health of the communities we serve.
- Exciting new ideas have emerged that would provide new opportunities for leadership training and Christian education along with some very interesting pilot projects for the sharing of resources and the use of websites and other technologies.

Tomorrow we have invited people across the Diocese to engage in this work at another level; to tell their stories, to share their ideas and resources, to make room for the Spirit and to give thanks for the many ways that the approaching Advent mystery is made real and alive to us once again.

Perhaps one of the most profound signs for me that this Vision has captured our imaginations and has touched something very deep within our common fellowship is that when we asked parishes and parish leaders to offer their own examples of their vision-driven ministries for the second day of Synod, the response was immediate. We are unable to accommodate all of the people who have asked to be present, over fifty displays and presentations! What this says to me is that the passion is there; the resources are there, and there is no doubt about the fact that we have the leadership and the commitment it will take to move this Vision forward God is with us let us come together tomorrow to give thanks and to rejoice!

We have set in motion the next phase of our work in allowing this Vision to find its way into the life of our Diocese by bringing together a leadership team for each of the “petals” or areas of focus: Life Changing Worship, A Continuous Culture of Innovation, Prophetic Social Justice Making, Outstanding Leadership for Ministry and A Generous Culture of Stewardship. Those teams will be in attendance tomorrow to engage with you personally, to hear about your passion for this work, to offer their help and resources and to seek your advice and suggestions. This is one Vision that won't be gathering dust on a shelf somewhere. It is already leaping off the page and finding its way into the hearts of the people of Niagara and it is helping us to dream and to step out in faith to meet the challenge of proclaiming the gospel to a new generation.

This work and the ongoing ministry of the Bishop been supported by so many people across Niagara and I am so incredibly grateful for the prayers, the encouragement and the assistance you have provided in so many ways. I want to thank Archdeacon Michael Patterson for his unfailing and exemplary work that he has undertaken in his position of Executive Officer and I am also most appreciative of the support and council I have received from our Dean Peter Wall. I would like to take this opportunity to offer a heartfelt word of thanks to Bob McKinnell for his work as our Diocesan Treasurer over the past many years and to wish him every blessing in his future plans and endeavours.

Again this year I owe so much to the work of Alison D'Atri and Karen Nowicki who serve so faithfully in the Episcopal offices. Alison continues to be a tower of strength to me as we have

attempted to work effectively through all of the transitions and challenges that have come our way and her knowledge and experience continue to be of immense help in so many ways.

I want to thank her from the bottom of my heart for the many times she has gone above and beyond the call of duty.

Our Cathedral Place staff has worked tirelessly this year and with great distinction, often in the wake of difficult and anxious circumstances. Their ministries continue to be some of the richest resources and wonderful gifts we have to offer in this Diocese and to each of them I express our thanks for their commitment and dedication to the life of our Diocesan family.

I would be very remiss if I did not offer a profound word of thanks to our Chancellor, Rob Welch, our Vice Chancellor, Terry Jackman and our Secretary of Synod, Rick Jones who have given, so freely, of their valuable time, advice and leadership throughout the course of another challenging year. I would also like to thank our Archdeacons for the council they have offered and for the extra duties they have taken on and I give thanks, too, for the work of our Regional Deans, committee Chairs and committee members who have overseen and enriched the wealth of ministry that we have shared in together.

In the context of this renewed sense of hope and anticipation it is also true that we need to turn our attention to the financial challenges that face us as a Diocese at the present time. In my charge to our second session of Synod in March of this year I said that the 2009 budget has “given us a small preview of the challenges and the incredibly difficult and painful decisions that will need to be made,” and our budget for 2010 continues in that vein. While the financial statements indicate a significant loss for 2008 I am pleased to report that we are still on track to break even in 2009. However, you will also have noted that we continue to carry a completely unacceptable level of accumulated debt that we must and will deal with immediately and comprehensively.

Synod Council has approved the formation of a “financial future” task force that has already begun meeting. They will continue to meet over the next few months to look at short-term and longer term solutions to bringing our finances back into line. Again this work will involve some very difficult decisions.



God's mission for our church.

In my time as Bishop alone, we have lost the equivalent of three full time positions at Cathedral Place and over the past ten years we have seen the Synod office staff cut significantly. The work and scope of our standing committees has for the most part remained the same for a substantial period of time and often the only major changes to our budget line items come about when we cut something as a result of a lack of funds. On the wider scene it is clear that many of our regional councils have ceased to function, Archdeacons are not only busy in their own parishes but are fully engaged in diocesan affairs and the same can be said for our clergy. In my opinion our governance models and our diocesan structures no longer adequately support and serve

My friends it is time that we allowed our Diocesan Vision to challenge not only the parishes of this Diocese but to hear in its call for innovation, effective resource management and outstanding leadership for ministry to be a challenge to reflect these values at all levels of our life and work as a

Diocesan household. Early in the New Year I am asking that a significant amount of our time at Synod Council be spent doing this kind of reflection and finding ways to initiate a thorough review.

During my first week in the role as your Bishop, in the midst of court proceedings, media scrums and intense and momentous decisions that needed to be made, my one regret was that I hadn't had more experience in the job before we were faced with these challenges. Over these past twenty months that seems to have been a recurring theme. It is also true that as we look ahead to the coming year we could be forgiven if we were feeling daunted by the weight of the tasks that lay ahead of us, and I know that I feel that way from time to time! Let's remember, however, that we are already well on the way with our new Diocesan Vision in hand and over these past months we have already accomplished more than we could have asked for or imagined.

In closing let me remind you of one more truth about our part in God's future for us and for the earth, a truth that comes to us in the writings of Madeleine L'Engle. In her book *Glimpses of Grace*, we find this message that highlights for me the greatest gift that we have been given, as we prepare to celebrate, in the days ahead, the mystery of Christ's coming:

God did not wait till the world was ready,
till people and nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. God did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy God came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came, and that Light would not go out.

God came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the world was born.

WE cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!