



The Anglican Diocese of Central Newfoundland

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**Bishop's Statement regarding the Closure of St. James Church in Kings Cove
July 2, 2017**

One of our foundational understandings as Anglicans is that each congregation or parish is part of a larger diocesan family. Each Anglican community of faith is aware that it's actions, choices and situations affect the larger Church.

Each congregation supports their local ministry and under oversight of the Bishop or appointed representative, in partnership with a parish shares its resources of people and finances to ensure a vibrant ministry takes place for all. The parish in turn, supports the Diocese which enables the ministries of the Bishop and a staff that works for the benefit of the diocese as a whole. We are found in many places throughout Central Newfoundland and may have our own traditions and customs, but follow the same set of guidelines and values for the benefit of all.

The Diocesan Policy on Church Closures and Repurposing Churches

Our Diocese is always willing and ready to hold conversations with other groups regarding partnerships and repurposing Church buildings and other property when the appropriate time comes. In many instances our diocese has facilitated community partnerships with working Churches by offering our buildings and ministries to benefit communities and groups. It is always our will to see our property and buildings continue in meaningful service whenever possible.

Sometimes when a church building or hall closes it is because a proactive decision has been made by the Parish. Such decisions usually contain some sense of the direction and purpose for the future use of the building or land. When church buildings have to close, and all community concerns, disagreements, and legalities have been settled, we have sold churches and halls to other denominations or individuals to be used for a variety of purposes.

The transfer of Church property is usually complicated because each situation and closure has its own unique dynamic. Generally speaking, complications arise through the various responses of the local community, legal requirements in relation to cemeteries, land, or location, and from people who may live away and may have a

distant connection with the Church. In many cases people react quickly from different perspectives before all information has been shared. When this happens before every voice has been clearly heard an unhealthy polarization usually takes place. What could be a potentially transforming and community building discussion, descends into adversarial competition, self-defense, acrimony and refusals to listen to the pain and viewpoints of each other.

The Realities facing St. James in Kings Cove

It is essential that those who are engaged in conversation about this Church make an effort to respectfully understand the realities facing the congregation and why each person feels the way they do. If we make this a priority, a community can be given new life.

Our Diocese is comprised of thirty-two parishes and one hundred and five separate congregations. We have many historic buildings in our diocese; many of them are larger and older than St. James and are located in smaller communities, yet the people there have taken steps to be proactive in relation to declining populations, maintaining and beautifying their church buildings, community partnerships and holding regular worship.

For many years, attempts have been made to reach out to the congregation of St. James Church. The financial situation and the need for repairs has consistently been made known and worship has been scheduled. Attendance at worship ranges from ten people to none, and on times clergy have arrived to find the door locked, and no one there. We reached a point where annual meeting attendance made it impossible to form a Vestry. As a result, there were only three people left to take on the offices required to constitutionally form a Vestry. I thank them on behalf of the Diocese for their service.

The photographs of St. James being used online are generally archived photos of a time long past. If you were to approach St. James Church now, you would see a building with peeling paint, cracked, and leaking windows, stained glass that is in danger of disintegrating, unsafe landings and uncut grass. There is no fence, and the cemetery adjacent to the church has been neglected for decades. The roof is partially re-shingled, and inside you will see signs of many leaks, sections of carpet torn up because pools of water have turned the fibers sour. You will notice the air quality is questionable. We strongly suspect that mold is present in various places throughout the chancel and sanctuary. You will also get a sense that when this church was built, it was beautifully done – that there must have been great devotion in this place. Spiritual people will instinctively grieve for the loss of faith and love; culturally and entrepreneurially focused people will feel that something must be done before it is too late. Some will connect with both emotions.

The Annual Meeting

The closing of a Church usually comes after leadership dwindles to a few who have tried valiantly to be faithful stewards of both the building and mission of the Church,

come face to face with the reality that the journey has come to an end. That can be a devastating and heart breaking time. On February 25th, 2017 a duly advertised annual meeting of the Church of St. James was held. Three people from the Church attended the meeting. These three people were the only duly elected or appointed officials of the Church from the previous year. No other parishioners attended. Because I was informed by the wardens that parishioners were duly notified, I conducted the meeting.

The discussion and financial statement confirmed the reality that a long standing concern in relation to declining numbers and lack of interest had reached a critical point. A motion was made and passed that it was time to close the Church. It was also moved at that meeting that if the building could no longer be used as a place of Christian worship, it would not be used for other purposes, and would be respectfully taken down, and each family who had donated windows or other items would be contacted and the items given to them. In my view, as these leaders took on the responsibility of such a heavy decision, they felt abandoned, frustrated, and emotional. As Bishop, I expressed my understanding of the emotions around that motion, and promised to work with it. Any motion to close or dismantle a Church building would have to be officially ratified by the Bishop prior to entering a contract to have the dismantling proceed. I have not done so.

It is not the desire of the Diocese, or those who attended the annual meeting to have the church building dismantled. The heart of our annual meeting was a search for answers to revive the Church community and return the building to a state worthy of its calling. Even after the motion was made and passed, there was hope expressed that people would come forward to protest the closure of the Church and make a commitment to keeping the congregation and community of faith alive.

The Meeting of June 1

A parish council meeting was called for June 1st 2017. Parish Council consists of members of every Church in a parish, and meets to discuss affairs that effect the parish as a whole. This meeting was called to discuss the sale of the rectory.

I had called a separate meeting to be held following the parish council with the three leaders of St. James Church to discuss how we would move forward with the closing and future of the building, and to discuss the possibilities of repurposing St. James. The intent of the meeting was to officially inform St. James's leaders of my decision, and advise them of the process of moving forward. This decision would have been shared publically immediately afterward.

That conversation was unable to take place because only one of the official leaders was in attendance. There was no official discussion, and no motion made.

Furthermore, the meeting and entire situation was complicated when a few members of St. James Church attended the parish council meeting. At times the parish council discussion around the rectory was confused by interruptions, misdirection and vocal

interpretations as these people tried to make a point about the church. I tried numerous times to clarify that this was a parish council meeting to talk about the rectory, and not about St. James Church building. I also tried numerous times to explain that no meeting about the Church building could be held without the proper officials present.

I understand that these people came to the meeting with a need to talk, but it was an inappropriate environment and time for that dialogue. Following the parish council meeting we had a short informal discussion, but there were no motions made about St. James, and no official meeting was held. Unfortunately, it is evident that the people who attended the meeting drew their own conclusions and made unfounded statements which were received by the media and the public as definitive.

Following the meeting I instructed our Archdeacon to notify a local business who had sent us an offer that the decision made at the annual meeting of February 18, 2017 to close St. James and dismantle the Church, was at the present time, still in place.

The email was sent with an assumption that conversation between the business and Diocese was confidential. We fully intended to contact them and explain that the rectory and Church building were separately titled as well as other complexities around the property, including concerns arising from our discovery that there have been burials adjacent to the church building. The presence of remains in consecrated ground affects land ownership and liabilities.

Detailed conversation about possible ways of working through this concern were made impossible because of the negative and confusing rhetoric contained in media statements, social networking and petitions. In all fairness, until I met with our duly appointed leaders to inform them of my decision, I could not engage in public discussion.

Let me be clear:

- I believe that the three men who attended the annual meeting have a love for the Church in their hearts, that they have worked hard and faithfully to keep the Church connected to the Diocese and Parish, and that their convictions are understandable.
- I believe that Mr. Ricketts approached us in good faith because he saw both a business opportunity and a chance to preserve cultural heritage in King's Cove. I regret that the lines of communication and information were not clear or complete on both sides.
- I believe that the public response to the announcements demonstrates the growing divide between Christianity and Culture. There is much we can and should learn from each other.
- I appreciate the energy shown by people who express their concerns for historical property, and affirm that our Diocese is always prepared for respectful conversation, stewardship and partnerships whenever possible.

- Petitions may be good indicators of cultural concerns, but it is easy to sign a petition as a statement of a view or opinion; it costs you nothing. I would encourage people before signing a petition to reflect on how your signature is only authentic if you are willing to make a commitment to respectful conversation, personal time, and finances in relation to the cause.

Moving Forward

On Sunday July 2, 2017 I held a meeting with the duly appointed leaders and shared my decision and direction with them. I have thanked them for their bravery, commitment and service, and for the courage to stand by their convictions. At the annual meeting the three in attendance were devastated by the decision they felt compelled to make. They asked me repeatedly if there was any way to keep the Church open. This meeting affirmed both the hope and desire to move forward, and they are thankful for the opportunities outlined below.

The Process That Will Be followed

1. Because the true mandate expressed at annual meeting centered around a sincere desire to keep our Community of Faith alive at St. James, as Bishop I declare that its mandate must be followed. Each contributing member of the Congregation will be given the opportunity to reply to me in writing about the ministry and function of St. James as a Parish Church. Every person on the congregation's register will receive a note from me which will clearly explain what is needed in relation to the building, leadership, and financial stewardship of St. James congregation. Once I hear from our people, I will hold a special meeting to discuss the formation of a new Vestry, and help the Church develop a plan for the future. This discussion will not be about saving a building, but about determining if a ministry is desired by the people or if it is viable. The deadline for this will be 15th October 2017.
2. If we determine that our people are no longer able or no longer desire to support the local ministry or the community of faith, at St. James, the Diocese will invite proposals for the repurposing and transfer of St. James building. At that time there will be a completely outlined document prepared so that prospective parties can fully understand the complexities, implications and requirements. If proposals are received, our Diocese will work closely with any interested party, and ensure that there is clarity, understanding, and mutual agreement. Proposals will be invited until November 30, 2017.
3. If no proposals are received, or we are unable to complete the process, the Bishop will serve public notice that every effort has been made to ensure responsible stewardship and transfer of the Church property, and the decision to have the building respectfully taken down by tender or contract, and the site remediated and closed for public use, will become final.

St. James has been closed to the public until a proper assessment is done to ensure liability concerns are dealt with. Once an air quality test is complete, we will have a better understanding of what we can do in the building.

It is my sincere wish to hold services there if possible, but that cannot happen unless people are willing to clean the building properly, do essential repairs, ensure that the air is safe, and the sanctuary made suitable for public gatherings.

I pray that we can all be united in the spirit of the purpose for which St. James was built. That our stories and concerns will bring us together so that something of lasting value may continue to be passed on. Invite everyone to a table of understanding where we can respectfully listen, share, and possibly realize when a community comes together our differences can make us strong. That would be a powerful heritage indeed to leave the next generation.

In the Faith of a God Who Loves us,

The Rt. Reverend John Watton