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## **Bishop's Charge**

### **to the 46<sup>th</sup> Diocesan Synod of Central Newfoundland**

Brothers and Sisters,

As a Diocese, one thing is becoming very clear. From where we stand today looking forward, the future is not what it used to be!

Many of us here will remember our frequent use of the phrase “We must move from Maintenance to Mission!” Now, many of us are saying with sinking feelings in our guts: “We must move from “Survival to Maintenance!”

To that I say “Enough!” To that I quote Philippians 4:19: And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

I'll be honest. We need to get on with the work at hand. We need to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church about the mission of Jesus.

We no longer have the time to comfortably rest on our laurels. We need to fearlessly and decisively engage realities of declining populations, huge infrastructure demands, and value shifts in communities. We know that our processes must be deeper theologically and practically than placing superficial blame around what has gone wrong. It is time to identify specific truths about what we are facing and work together to build on real possibilities. Many in our diocese are calling on leaders to get on with this; others are so bogged down with energy draining, repetitive, and captive conversations about paying bills and human sexuality that we in some ways are finding ourselves sick and tired of it.

Before we can do that, we need to get through our discussion on human sexuality. This gathering has been convened as a regular Synod, but because it is a completion of my promise, post General Synod, to bring the matter of human sexuality before our people, that will be our priority.

Tomorrow morning, I will call on the Archdeacon and Synod Office staff to update you on Diocesan matters and concerns, and bring some suggestions and motions before you as Synod. We will provide time for notices of motion and motions.

Tomorrow afternoon I will ask your General Synod delegate to present a report of their experiences at our Church Council. I will then provide you with an overview of what happened at General Synod, what is happening throughout our Church, and the deep importance of the Document *A Word to the Church*.

Then, through a motion, our Diocese will be asked to give public voice to our own discernment around inclusion and marriage equality. We will vote on affirming what has already been declared nationally by a large majority through our General Synod, and confirming our Bishop's ministry of granting permission to those Clergy and parishes who desire to provide Marriage Liturgies for same sex couples in the Diocese of Central Newfoundland. I remind you of two things here:

**First:** We are NOT voting on changing the Marriage Canon.

**Second:** Under no circumstance will any priest in our Diocese be forced to perform a marriage that they are not prepared or willing to do.

### **Now let us Speak of Holy Conversations**

Much of the Hebrew Bible reflects upon Holy Conversations with God, held through experiences of both God's presence and absence. We think of the conversation with Adam and Eve after God came calling, knowing the human race was in trouble: "Adam Adam...where are you?" Noah, made a fool. Moses' very encounter with God at Sinai was a veiled presence, a 'thick darkness' amid lightning as the Bible says. Wisdom literature often describes God's voice as a whisper in the silent time. Psalmists and captives beg for mercy, deliverance and vindication. Jesus Cries out as a forsaken sinner. The Bible tells these stories, through the interpretive narratives of nations and individuals searching for God.

The Bible is a Holy Conversation between Past, Present and Future, blending honest, complex narratives of human endeavor passed on orally and eventually set down in thousands of forms of print. Each narrative a different and yet joined human understanding of what was discerned as the will of God.

The New Testament proclaims a God With us, One of us, a Revealer of truth for every generation in every age. I pray that today in Central Newfoundland, we still hunger for the movement of a living God.

*I Believe, Lord, that you are here present. Although my eyes do not see you, my faith senses you. Take any stray thoughts from my mind. Make me understand the truths which you wish to teach me in this meditation. Let me make up my mind to put them into practice. Your servant is listening; speak Lord, to my soul. Amen.*

One spring evening over 35 years ago, I found my way to St. Andrews Church in Glenwood. It had been a very long time since I had been to worship; but there was a mother in law to make happy and a baby to be baptized.

Karen and I had simply put off the baptism. God and Church community had been moved far from the center of our lives. We had gotten married by a judge at City Hall, and to be honest, we didn't care much about religious values, culture, or practice.

It is accurate to say that I was just emerging from a very troubled childhood, carrying a lot of baggage from my past into a young marriage. I was a child of a tumultuous, authoritarian and abusive home, who had developed an image of God as some vindictive overlord, to be feared, else the punishment would be dark and severe. I didn't trust any of it.

I felt too broken, too dirty... to belong.

But that evening something happened. The Rector of the parish remembered me as a child, called me by name and said with compassion and authenticity: "I often wondered what happened to you my son..." It was as if God was saying: "Now that I have your attention, hear me: I DON'T hate you. I love you."

That was for me, A Holy Conversation.

Shortly after at the baptism of our second child, the minister asked the congregation to stand. "Will you who witness these vows, do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?"

**“We will!”** came the clear and sincere response.

That Was, in the Church and for the Church, a Holy Conversation.

Today, I still believe with all my heart that conversation brought me home to the Anglican Church and our Diocese, and to our National and International Communion. In fact, not a day passes without my heart and mind recalling the ways the people of our beloved Anglican Church welcomed me, consistently assuring me that I was accepted, needed, and safe.

I remember the patient wisdom of the elders of our Church as they embraced my confused enthusiasm, and taught me through word, inclusion, patience and acts of kindness and generosity. These people taught me about the depth and beauty of the Via Media: The Middle Way, and how Anglicanism’s essence is found as we walk together on a path balanced by Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

(There is an article in your Synod Resource package which may be of interest to you should you wish to explore further.)

With all my heart, I pray that is who we still are. How many more today need to hear the **“We Will!”** response? There are many who need the loving, inclusive family that we are called to be, that we can be, and the Holy Conversation that we can facilitate and share.

Now, as we gather to take counsel in Synod, I ask you to consider the Holy Conversation that is taking place in our world today. The Anglican Church of Canada is a wonderful example of how that is unfolding. Walking generous and loving paths we have listened and responded to the pain of indigenous people, oppressed women, sexual and industrial slaves, belittled minorities; people who have been and still are being trapped in the darkness of human greed and capitalist avarice.

The Anglican Church of Canada has engaged partnerships with government agencies and ecumenical and interfaith organizations to maximize the benefits to poor and disenfranchised people. The Anglican Church fearlessly challenges unfair and oppressive social, economic and environmental systems, and has called for justice and action regarding inequality of gender and sexuality.

The Anglican Church of Canada has been called to a prophetic role among nations.

I am thankful to belong to our beloved Church.

**I ask you to engage the Holy Conversation** that is taking place in the Church around human sexuality. This is not just about LGBTQ2 orientation. It is about justice, and about listening to the Holy Spirit. It is about confronting the systemic religious and cultural judgement that anything other than heterosexual orientation **MUST** be a choice or illness.

**Let us remind ourselves of an important truth.**

While it is true that most people do have a heterosexual orientation and identify with the given gender of their birth, it is known this is not same for everyone. Science and psychology continue to confirm this as a reality, with the all major psychological associations no longer branding variations in sexual orientation and gender identity as disorders, but as naturally occurring, and healthy. The basic theological question is this: “If God created someone to be the way they are, when we insist it is otherwise, are we not saying that God’s Creation is flawed?”

If we don’t challenge ourselves with that question, we can never take ownership or responsibility of how our personal, cultural and religious stigmatization has been deeply destructive, or even begin to appreciate or what spiritual growth we have missed by excluding those created in the image of God.

It is time to stop saying “I love you, **BUT** the Bible says...” As an excuse for anything.

The Holy Conversation being asked of this Synod: “Now that I have your attention, hear me: I **DON’T** hate. I love you. Do you hear me? Do you accept all people that I have created as a gift?”

**Holy Conversation in Our Diocese**

Over the past three years, I have made many visits to deaneries, parishes and congregations. Many of these visits have been joyful events such as Confirmations, Ordinations, Baptisms, prayer and praise services and so on. Some have been about struggles of faith, others about conflict, maintenance and survival. In addition, it is well known that since General Synod 2016 (and before) I and the regional deans have been facilitating many conversations around human sexuality.

I remind you that one of the important roles of the Bishop is to travel with and among the people of the Church, exercising the ministry of listening, teaching and discerning the

common voice of the people. The Bishop through prayerful discernment then shares that which he or she has heard with people wherever they gather.

### **Let me summarize what I have heard around our Diocese.**

To begin with, there are some who value interpretations of Scripture in a very literal way. Their journey has led them to understand that the Bible is the sole authority in life and religion, and is accurate in everything it says, regarding matters of faith, history, science, geography and other unfolding disciplines.

Some of these people cannot accept the call of our General Synod expressed through the document A Word to the Church that all diverse opinions have come from places of sincerity and authentic experiences with the Holy Spirit, or that we are called to stay together as a Church. Some believe that right and wrong belief is clearly defined in the Bible, and cannot stand together. This Either - Or expression of spirituality is often referred to as a “Binary” understanding. Some believe that we are bowing to the whims of Culture, and not being led by the Spirit in our time to be inclusive.

To those, we say, go in peace. We will pray for your journey to be a blessed one, and our doors and hearts will remain open to everyone who comes to us or returns home.

### **From many Conversations and Gatherings:**

- I have heard in our Diocese many stories, from people who say they always believed that everyone should be loved, and out of respect for the mainline teaching of the Church stayed even though they had children, grandchildren, friends and relatives who were of a different orientation.
- I have heard many young and old who said even if they don't agree or understand what is happening, they would NEVER leave their Church because we are truly a family.
- I hear in our Diocese that there is a great love and concern for our Church.
- I hear in our Diocese that we need to move on from the conversation on human sexuality to talking about how we can build sustainable and missional communities.
- I hear a sense of thanksgiving from many families that our Church is talking about inclusion in a way that will actually make a difference. Prior to each deanery consultation I received phone calls from numerous families in each deanery

sharing stories about love, challenge, disappointment and doubt. Each one encouraged me to stay the course, and most expressed that they could not attend public meetings because they did not feel safe there. I believe that is changing dramatically in our midst.

- I hear parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends and couples; people of all ages declaring that they will choose unconditional love for their LGBTQ2 brothers and sisters over any Church or religious doctrine.
- I hear of Clergy devoted to Scripture, Tradition, and Reason taking steps of faith to preach a gospel that is good news for all, especially for the marginalized and cast-out.
- I hear of Clergy and Laity needing time, freedom and safe place to believe as suits their conscience.
- I hear of a Diocese, not quite sure where we are going, but knowing in the depth of our beings and with the persuasion of the Holy Spirit, that inclusion is the right thing to do, and this is the right time to trust the Spirit.

## **A Bigger Picture**

I consistently hope and believe that every part of the world is being called into Holy Conversation. Along with that call comes a promised blessing by the Spirit. I believe the Spirit of our Creator is calling every power and principality, every Church Community or person of individual faith to repent of the ways each one has marginalized, excluded or wounded any and all of those whom God loves.

I believe when our Diocese enters this new Holy Conversation as one by the voice of this Synod, we will be set free to walk in a refreshed vision of our future as a Joyful, Purposeful, Healed and Healing Church.

## **At this Synod**

- We are recognizing human sexuality and inclusion as a justice issue.
- We are affirming that LGBTQ2S people are precious human beings, created in the image of God.
- We are affirming healthy relationships.

I restate that whatever voice we hear today, no one will be bound to act against their conscience. As long as I am Bishop I will affirm what has been approved at our General Synod, and outlined in A Word to the Church, that there is a diversity of valid spirit led viewpoints in our church.

I stand with the Bishops who apologized to the Canadian Church for the pain the house of Bishops caused by quenching the voice of the Spirit that had clearly been revealed through the vote of the Clergy and Laity of General Synod.

I must remind you as well, that I have the authority and responsibility as Bishop to grant permission without consulting Synod, but you all know now how important it is for our voice to be heard as one. This is a decision of the whole church – Lay, Clergy, and Bishop. We make it together.

Once approval is given, all successive bishops will be expected to respect the will of the people of the diocese as expressed in the discernment of this synod. Change regarding marriage liturgies will come only through the Bishop's permission when a parish makes a request through its Parish Council or annual general meeting. Today's motion merely opens the door to the possibility of such change in congregations or parishes

I have directed that the vote be taken by secret ballot so that each and every person will be free to vote according to their conscience without any pressure. This vote is not canonical and so will require only a simple majority of voting members to pass. (50% + 1) It is my direction that the entire body of Synod vote together and not by houses.

Throughout the National Church, in most Dioceses, and in our Sister Dioceses of Eastern and Western Newfoundland and Labrador, the Spirit has clearly called us to inclusion. I now ask this Synod to declare itself.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John, Central Newfoundland". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a cross-like symbol above it.

October 25<sup>th</sup> 2019