

Bishop's Charge
Second Session of the 140th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario
November 8, 2014

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to our Cathedral and to this second session of the 140th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara. Our Synod gathering this session is centred around the question: "What does it mean to be Anglican?" and, as we explore that question not only here in our time together today but in gatherings in parishes across the diocese, it is my hope that such an exploration will give us an opportunity to share with each other our faith stories and our understanding of how the presence and love of God has shaped and charted the course of our lives.

So let me set that process in motion by sharing something of what that looks like, in my life, and what it means to me vocationally and personally, to be an Anglican in this day and age that we find ourselves in.

I want to begin by telling those who don't already know that I was born and raised in Oakville. Not only was I born and raised in Oakville but so was my mother and while my Father was born in Toronto he grew up on a farm where the Ford plant sits today. I remember being at an anniversary dinner at one of our parishes in Oakville, with a room full of people, and I asked the question: "Who else in this room can say the same...that both they and at least one of their parents was born and raised in this town." Not one other person put up their hand!

Until I was twenty, I never lived more than three blocks from at least one of my grandparents and a number of my aunts and uncles lived in Oakville as well. Almost every Saturday night my father and my uncles gathered in our basement to watch Hockey Night in Canada and those evenings and many other family events gave me the opportunity to interact with a wide circle of family and friends that nurtured deep and meaningful relationships that continue to shape and inform me to this day. I know, and you know, that that kind of family dynamic no longer exists for the vast majority of the people we encounter in the Diocese of Niagara today.

My life as a Christian and as an Anglican, throughout those years, was interwoven with this story from the moment I was born. I was baptized at St. Aidan's Anglican Church in Oakville at the age of two and a half months and the Rector who baptized me was none other than John Bothwell, who would go on to be the 8th Bishop of Niagara. Bishop John died this past year and I had the privilege of visiting with him the day before he died and we talked about the fact that he had baptized me.

He was famous for loving a good pun and in our conversation I told him that I only had one complaint about my baptism. I speculated that he was experimenting with full immersion in those days and that he may have held me under the water a little too long! We continue to give thanks to God for Bishop John's life, ministry and witness and our love and prayers continue to be with his wife Joan and family.

Without exception the next three Rectors at St. Aidan's would play significant roles in my formative years: Bill Anthony, Don Powell and Doug Perry. The connection between the Community of the Sisters of the Church and St. Aidan's was well established in those days and there was always a Sister from the Community who took an active role in our parish life. My confirmation teacher was Sister Juliana and believe me she was a force to be reckoned with in all kinds of wonderful ways. I was a member of the junior choir, the servers' guild, head server, chalice bearer, member of Parish Council, worship committee member and Regional Council delegate all before I was 19 years old.

The worship that was at the heart of my early life in the church was well-centred in the celebration of the Eucharist in the Anglo-Catholic tradition and in the Book of Common Prayer and, I also have to admit that, to this day, there is nothing more healing and comforting for me than attending a BCP sung Evensong. Perhaps one of the most painful and difficult parts of my journey in the Church over these fifty seven years is coming to the realization that, once again, the vast majority of the people we now encounter in the Diocese of Niagara, will not have had this experience or any connection to the Church.

I took that experience of my life at St. Aidan's and my Sunday school version of religion with me as I went off to University to study science and mathematics and believe me, my faith was challenged and assaulted on every side. Even in those days however, the Church was there for me and I attended an Anglicans on Campus group at the Erindale site of the University of Toronto that was led by a local parish priest in Streetsville. That, combined with long conversations with my Rector, Doug Perry, I emerged with a new and more resilient faith perspective. In the last year of my studies I had decided to begin a process of discernment that would lead to a life in ordained ministry. Ironically, on the day of my election as the Bishop of Niagara I received a call from that former parish priest in Streetsville. His name is Andrew Hutchinson and he was calling me, on that day, in his capacity as the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada.

As I continued on in my life as a deacon, priest and bishop, God has continued to bless me with a wonderful wife and family, a long list of mentors, colleagues, and friends, both lay and ordained, to whom I am deeply indebted and for whom I am profoundly thankful.

My answer, then, to the question: “What does it mean to be Anglican” begins with a list of the things that are personally meaningful to me. There is our rich heritage and tradition of theological reflection and liturgical practice, and the many ways we read, engage with and are guided by the Bible. As an Anglican, I am richly blessed by our prayer books and liturgies, especially when those liturgies are well-planned, and rich in meaning and reflect elements of creativity. I am also grateful for our understanding of how the grace of God touches our human reality in our administration of the sacraments of the Church and would also hold up as a gift, the ways we structure our lives as Anglicans; how we govern ourselves and how we recognize and exercise authority in many forms. I feel blessed by many of our ways of being Anglican, including through theological reflection; careful, meaningful and creative worship; sacraments; our approaches to governance and authority, and, yes, even our structures.

Having heard my story, however, it will not be a surprise for you to hear me say that one of the things that I particularly hold dear about my life in the Anglican Church, is the gift of relationship; the precious and life-giving relationship that I have with God and Jesus, the Christ, and the ways that that sacred encounter with the divine has been nourished and made real in the human relationships that I have been blessed with along the way.

In the Gospel reading we have chosen for today, the lectionary Gospel from two Sundays ago, Jesus encounters a group of Pharisees and from the moment they meet him, their intention is one of distancing themselves from Jesus. In fact, the word “Pharisee” means one who separates themselves from others - from the “heathen” and from some other Jews.

The Pharisees were highly invested in tradition, in the letter of the law and in rigid structures of governance. They were a political, religious sect that emerged in the third century B.C., following the Exile, as the people of Israel found themselves confronted with a variety of different belief systems, political ideologies and societal norms and influences. In fairness their stance of “battening down the hatches,” of separating themselves from the rest of the world as much as possible and vilifying and victimizing those who see things differently, is an age old reaction that religious people have employed when they meet with challenge and lose a sense of direction. Sadly, it remains with us in our Anglican Church, in the Christian Church as a whole, in the wider world and quite locally. As we continue to mourn the loss of Corporal Nathan Cirillo, we see how this impulse for separation still plays out on the world scene.

The Pharisees tried desperately to trick Jesus or to back him into a corner on a number of occasions and in this passage they ask him to choose the greatest commandment of all. He says to them: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and that you should also love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

There is no doubt that we would all agree that loving God is the defining purpose and activity of our life. It is interesting to note, however, that our Lord was unwilling to name this one commandment as the greatest; that the love of one's neighbour (and oneself!) is absolutely inseparable from our love of God and we cannot do one without the other. In Luke's gospel this same story has a twist. The Pharisee or the lawyer immediately asks Jesus: "And who is my neighbour?" This leads into Jesus telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. And we all know that at the end of that parable, Jesus asks his own question: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The answer comes back: "The one who showed mercy." Jesus replies: "Go and do the same." "Go and do likewise" it is our mission, it is our callingwe worship God and then we go and show mercy to our neighbour. We are called to be in relationship with God's people everywhere.

Malcolm Grundy in his book, Leadership and Oversight: New Models for Episcopal Ministry, writes: "Churches are the places where activity and beliefs are built on relationship. People in their many types and with their various hopes and expectations are the life-blood of the church. It has to be that those who are called to any kind of responsibility in any church depend more than anything else on the quality of relationship....."

For me, then, the good news in all of this is that I believe that our beloved Anglican Church, with all its faults and foibles, is hard-wired for relationships. We are hard-wired to be in relationship in so many ways, bishop and clergy, bishop and parishes, clergy and people, parish to parish, and bishop to bishop, within the diocese, across Canada and around the world. We are hard-wired to support and share with one another, learn from one another, pray with and for one another. In the challenges we have faced and the opportunities we embrace, it is always in the context of a journey that is taken together that we follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Let me spend a few minutes telling you why I believe this matters and matters deeply.

On Wednesday, October 22, I was sitting in the Niagara Room at Cathedral Place in our weekly staff meeting. As we met, through the attentiveness of one member of the staff, Bill Mous, our social media guru, we had the information that a soldier had been shot in Ottawa from the moment the first news broke. By early afternoon the word came to us that that soldier was an Argyll and Sutherland Highlander from Hamilton and immediately the Dean and I walked down to the Armouries. The regiment was in lock down but outside the media had begun to gather and there, by himself, was the Mayor, and we were able to share our disbelief and our shock with him and we pledged our support and our assistance to the people of Hamilton in the midst of this terrible tragedy. The Dean also told the Mayor that the Cathedral was opening its doors to all who needed a place for prayer, meditation, or just to have somewhere to gather. It was clear that the Mayor was deeply grateful.

While I was standing outside the Armouries, a call came in from Bishop Peter Coffin, our Anglican Bishop to the Armed Forces. He wanted to make sure that I knew that the soldier who was killed was an Argyll and Sutherland from Hamilton and I shared with him the news of the details of what we were doing at this end. He told me that the chaplain, Canon Rob Fead, the Rector of our parish at St. Jude's Church in Oakville was already with Corporal Cirillo's family and was preparing to fly with them to Ottawa. I want to pay tribute to Rob Fead for the incredible ministry he exercised in support of the Cirillo family and the regiment in the course of those days.

In time we learned that, despite a number of possible alternatives, the family wanted the funeral service to be held at our Cathedral, and the moment that that word was received the members of the Cathedral Place staff did, what every one of our congregations would do and has done in this kind of situation, we did everything humanly possible to allow the Church to open our doors wide and to proclaim the good news of the gospel even in the midst of such tragedy and death. For a number of the staff their life was turned upside down with the physical details, the thousands of telephone calls that came in, the overwhelming media frenzy and requests for interviews, and the task of dealing with over 150 pages of instructions that came from military headquarters and the Prime Minister's Office. It is just one of the countless examples of how each member of our staff at Cathedral Place is a blessing to me personally and to all of us in the Diocese of Niagara. It is also important for me to acknowledge with gratitude the fact that we have a staff and a Cathedral Place to meet in because every parish in the diocese supports and shares in this ministry.

As I have said a number of times, this funeral was a ministry event without precedence in my thirty years of ordained ministry and I am so grateful to all who contributed in any way to the work that led up to this national day of mourning.

We have received emails and messages from people across Canada who have expressed their deep appreciation. One woman from Calgary wrote this to us: "Such tremendous hope, the grace of God, deep compassion, wide embrace of all people, a strong message to the entire world that evil will not have the final word in this tragedy."

As a family of Anglicans across the diocese, across Canada and indeed around the world, we have ready-made networks that allow us to respond more effectively to the challenges and opportunities we face as a church in the 21st century. Whenever a national funeral happens in Hamilton; when a community garden is opened; when desperately needed supplies are sent to communities in the Arctic; when the needs of our neighbours are being met in the local community and as far away as Cuba, Honduras and Belize; when newcomers are welcomed to a church service held in a pub, a jazz mass, or a young people's gathering service; when a visit is made to a government official to advocate for a remedy to a particular injustice; when we stand with refugees; and, as each one of our congregations find new ways to proclaim the gospel afresh in this day and age; we do it standing together.

Sometimes I visit a particular congregation and they say to me that they are worried because they are doing nothing for young people, or nothing to address the problems of First Nations communities in the North. My answer to that is: "Actually, yes you are!" It may not be happening in this particular parish but lots of work is being done with young people and Anglicans have a strong and vital presence in the North. Together, we Anglicans are offering incredible ministries and endeavouring to do our best to address the needs of people in every corner of the globe. There are many more significant unmet needs. God's mission of justice and peace is ongoing and it calls us, who follow Christ passionately, to continue to pursue excellence, practise justice and grow. But the truth is that we have so much to give thanks to God for as we gather at Diocesan Synod today.

The exciting news about this is that no parish is burdened with the pressure of being all things to all people. Every congregation has the freedom to take stock of the blessings, the talents, the passions for ministry and the treasure that we do have and to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in each local context. Often it will mean that we are called to seek out partnerships with other churches and other community agencies to engage in the work and ministry that God is calling us to, and I am delighted to report that these kinds of connections are emerging all across the Diocese of Niagara.

More than this, however, our common life together reflects the understanding of the early Christian communities that we find in the writing of St. Paul: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." (1 Corinthians 12:12)

Let me therefore conclude with some thoughts on what I believe is important for us to pay attention to in the coming year:

We will renew our commitment to partnerships; initiating, encouraging and supporting relationships between parishes, faith and community groups, justice networks, social service agencies and non-profit organizations.

The Bishop's office staff will explore ways of freeing up more of my time to engage with clergy and congregations. Parish visits with the Regional Archdeacon will resume and be enhanced.

We will step up the development of Ministry Covenants as a visible sign of this gift of relationship that we share in the diocese.

The Bishop's Indaba gatherings, as a follow up to this year's Clergy and Licensed Lay Workers Conference will begin early in the new year.

Next year we will celebrate the 140th anniversary of the Diocese of Niagara and I am calling on the members of Synod Council to begin making plans for a major celebration. Let us gather to give thanks to God for our past and present ministries and for the blessings that we so richly experience in our common life together. As part of our celebrations I intend to invite our Primate, Fred Hiltz, to be with us and engage with us at some point over the course of the year.

I am also asking each region of the Diocese to plan an event that will bring congregations together to celebrate and to connect with one another in this anniversary year.

I have spoken a great deal about the gift of relationship and, in closing, I would like to acknowledge and give thanks for the gift and privilege I have been given in the relationships I have with the clergy and the people of the Diocese of Niagara. From my vantage point, as Bishop, I can see the passion for ministry that is being offered so freely and so courageously across Niagara and you empower me and inspire me and bring me great hope and excitement for the days ahead!

Jesus said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind." and that "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." May these precious words be written on our hearts as we strive to allow them to become a reality in our lives, in our congregations and across the Diocese of Niagara and may God continue to bless this work that we share in together in the days and years to come.