

Bishop's Charge
134th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
Christ's Church Cathedral - November 7, 2008

Imagine for a moment a small room, no bigger than ten feet by fourteen feet. I suppose that had it been at any other time of the year, that room would have served as a very tiny tutorial room on the campus of the University of Kent. For three weeks, however, it served as the daily meeting room for seven Bishops, three from Africa, two from England, one from the United States and one other Bishop, who was forever being called or introduced as the Bishop of Niagara Falls.

It was a bare and austere room with nothing but a few well worn stacking chairs. There were none of the items that we are so used to having at our disposal when we gather for meetings today: flip charts, audio visuals, no high tech devices, not even a table to set our books on. We came with just our bible study guides that had the texts printed of Jesus' I am sayings in John's Gospel and a few simple discussion questions. In a very real sense that small room served as a blank canvas for those



gatherings and each day for an hour and a quarter we poured over the scriptures and allowed them to be for us a doorway into some incredibly powerful stories, profound insights and wonderful moments of deep fellowship. As I have said many times that common simple room was holy ground each day for me and my bible study group was one of great highlights of my time this summer at Lambeth.

As I reflect back now upon my first eight months as the Eleventh Bishop of Niagara, I can see that a vision was already beginning to form as I travelled to England. Each day as we heard Jesus' rightful claim to the divine title 'I am' in these passages of John's gospel, and then made real in the lives and ministry of fellow bishops from around the world, I experienced a new sense of clarity for my episcopal ministry and for the work I believe we are called to engage in together.

"I am the one who is speaking to you" John 4:6-42

"I am, do not be afraid" John 6:14-21

"I am the bread of life" John 6:1-14 and 25-59

"I am the light of the world" John 8:1-20

"I am the good shepherd" John 10:11-18

"I am the true vine" John 15:1-17

One of these bible studies focused upon John, chapter 10 in which Jesus says "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." It seems to me that this passage invites us to participate in a journey that involves both entering into the sheep enclosure and going out beyond the sheepfold. All gates have an inside, leading to a secure and intimate dwelling and they have an outside, leading to pasture

and abundant life. The question the study asked the bishops to ponder is this: “What does it mean for us to think of Jesus as the gate that both invites the world into the Church and urges the sheep to follow Jesus trustingly into the world?”

Immediately my thoughts returned to my installation here in the Cathedral on March 2nd, and those few minutes I stood with representatives from across our diocese outside the Cathedral waiting for the doors to be opened and allowing us to enter.

In my sermon that day I also made reference to the ceremony of the opening of the Holy Door at Saint Paul's Basilica, in Rome, nine years ago when Pope John Paul II generously invited the Archbishop of Canterbury and the representative of the Orthodox Ecumenical patriarch to help him open one of the five Holy Doors that can be found in the Basilicas in Rome. They are doors that are sealed shut and only opened to pilgrims during Jubilee years. I mentioned that at first the doors seemed stuck until all three leaders pushed together and pushed harder and then the doors opened.

On Tuesday night, in the US Presidential election, we witnessed another new door opening and the breaking down of barriers that has sent ripples of hope and promise not only across the United States but around the entire world. This evening as our service concludes, I want to return to the Cathedral doors that were so graciously and joyfully opened and allowed me to enter into my new role in the life of this diocese. Now as we are strengthened by the hand of God and compelled by the emergence of this new vision for our diocese, I want to open those doors once again, but now out onto the world, and to commit ourselves to live for God's mission of bringing that same hope and promise to the people we are called to serve.

The vision that has been emerging at regional meetings and clergy gatherings across the diocese calls us away from a posture of mere survival to a vision of vibrant, abundant, hope-filled life in the Church. It invites us all to embrace what has become my mantra over these past many months: “the pursuit of excellence in ministry.” It is a challenge to us all to reclaim our prophetic voice in a troubled and broken world and to lead the fight against poverty, violence and injustice that continues to pervade our communities and our society. As part of this aspect of our work together there is a strong challenge to embrace the United Nations Millennium Development Goals of 2001 and there will be material available tomorrow that outlines what those goals entail.

I believe we need to celebrate the gifts for ministry that we have been given in Niagara and to move forward with a theological premise of abundance rather than scarcity. Pushing harder on those doors together doesn't necessarily mean working harder or longer hours but rather a more effective use of our resources and the practice of good stewardship. It is about concentrating on areas of passion and creativity, about sharing our gifts and making sure we get the resources into the hands of the people that need them.

This brings me to our present financial position, and the request I am making around the passing of the 2009 Budget. The diocese faces significant financial challenges that must be addressed soon to ensure that we can continue to meet our obligations around payroll and our standing with the bank. The current pressure on cash flow in 2008 is the result of costs associated with the breakaway parishes including legal, administrative and operating expenses, significant historical, outstanding parish receivables, return on investments below our budgeted figures, increasing operating deficits

associated with Cathedral Place, and the size of the deficits incurred by the diocese over the past two years.

There is no doubt that we have some serious work ahead of us over the next few months but I believe that in times such as these it is even more imperative to have a set of markers or criteria to help us make the difficult decisions that will be necessary to make. To that end, I have asked for a significant amount of time at this Synod to do some further reflection and engagement with our vision and then come back to Synod in February or March with a more realistic picture of where we are headed.

This will still be an interim step toward the hopes and dreams we have for the future but we will have before us an emerging vision and a clearer understanding about what it will take to get us there.

My dear friends, here is the bottom line: **the status quo is no longer an option** both in terms of how we function as parishes and how we function as a diocese. Let us be united in this firm commitment that **we are moving well beyond a position of mere survival** and passionately and creatively responding to God's mission in every region of the diocese.

Just over a year ago, in that Consecration service, I stood at the chancel steps of this Cathedral and answered the questions posed to me by our Metropolitan, Caleb Lawrence. I had no idea then, just how two of those promises would need to be held in such a state of tension in this early stage of my episcopacy: "Will you boldly proclaim and interpret the gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of your people?" and "Will you share with your fellow bishops in the government of the whole church ...?"

Over the past several months, I have endeavoured to prayerfully and faithfully wrestle with these two critical duties of a bishop in the Church and at times dealing with the issue of the blessing of same sex unions has felt like a monumental task and a heavy burden to bear. How do I keep in balance the responsibility I feel toward those who have elected me as their bishop, while at the same time remaining faithful and loyal to the members of our National Church and the Anglican Communion? So many times I have prayed for the wisdom of Solomon around this issue and I continue to wait upon God for a more complete answer.

However my faithful attempt to respond to this responsibility and challenge has now been made public, on Monday in the form of my response to the Statement of the House of Bishops and my more detailed release yesterday that outlines our next steps as we move forward. I am fully aware that some on both sides of the issue will see this as a lack of wise leadership on my part and I accept that. Having consulted as widely as possible, across our own diocese, across our country, at the House of Bishops (including many discussions with our Primate), and of course at Lambeth, I believe that I have come to a better understanding of what is at stake and what the implications are of the decisions we make at this critical period in the history of our Church. There is time set aside on tomorrow's agenda for me to hear directly from members of synod in response to these announcements.

I cannot begin to express adequately my gratitude for the support and assistance I have been given by so many people across Niagara, many of the people in attendance here this evening. I want to particularly thank Dean Peter Wall for the incredible support and assistance he has given me and for his work as Bishop's Commissary this past summer. I want to thank Archdeacon Michael Patterson for agreeing to accept the position of Executive Officer and for all the ways that he has so willingly

shared in the joys and the challenges that have come our way in these first few months. I am also especially grateful for the work and counsel of Bob McKinnell our Diocesan Treasurer. Bob has served our diocese with great distinction for many years and I value his leadership a great deal both in the Department of Finance and as a member of our senior staff team.

I want to thank Karen Nowicki and Alison D'Atri who serve so faithfully and so graciously in the episcopal offices. I want to particularly offer a special word of thanks to Alison who has been such an immense help to me in this first year and has been such a wealth of knowledge and experience. It could not have been easy to adapt to the changes that come with a new bishop in the office next door but she has been a tower of strength to me personally in so many ways.

If I was to mention each of our Cathedral Place staff members and the incredible work that they do each day on behalf of our diocesan family, we would be here for a very long time. To each of them, I offer a sincere word of thanks and my admiration for the tremendous work that they do on behalf of us all.

Over the past eight months I don't think a week has gone by that didn't include at least one call and often several calls to our Diocesan Chancellor. The special ministry of Rob Welch has been a wonderful blessing to the bishops and people of the Diocese of Niagara for so many years but, in this particular instance, with a very new bishop and so many critical decisions to be made, Rob's wisdom and guidance has been an incredible gift to me personally and to us all. My sincere thanks to Terry Jackman, our Vice-Chancellor, for his faithfulness and his support to me also during the past year. I would like to recognize the work of Gerry Aggus, our Diocesan Solicitor, who continues to represent the diocese so well and provide assistance to me when needed. In the midst of some of these difficult decisions the Synod Secretary, Rick Jones has, without exception, made himself available and has been a special partner in all that has transpired. We have also been so blessed by the work of our Archdeacons who have not only served their own parishes but have been very much a part of the team at a diocesan level.

My dear wife, Susan, has stood with me every step of the way. I want to express my love and my profound gratitude to her and to my children, Michael, Matthew and Sarah for being so understanding and so accepting of the many ways our lives have been turned upside down. I have been blessed by the care and love I have received from my family and from a few very special friends, whose presence and willingness to listen, have helped me put things in perspective on some very difficult days.

As I look back upon the past eight months, it is so very clear to me that the gift of God's presence and love has upheld me and all of us as we have journeyed together. I give thanks for the many ways I have been lifted up in prayer in this time and for the strength those prayers have given me as I continue my work as a Bishop. I believe that a profound movement of the Holy Spirit is sweeping across our diocese and calling us into this new vision and leading us boldly into the future.

My first year in episcopal ministry has taken me beyond Canada to our partner Diocese in Cuba and to the Lambeth Conference in England. It has offered a very sharp learning curve for me in terms of National Church affairs, diocesan committee structures, and the work of our Synod Office staff, and there was the crash course that I had, in those very early days, with the Canadian legal system. It is true, however, that the richest and most life-giving experiences in the past year have come in the encounters I have had with you, the clergy and the lay people of the Diocese of Niagara. I give

thanks to God for this wonderful calling and I thank you for the privilege of serving by your side. May we step boldly through those doors together, with a fresh vision, and a renewed commitment to God's glorious mission and for the work we will share in together in the days and weeks to come.