

Rector's Charge to the Annual Meeting of Christ Church, Calgary 20 February 2011

Don't ask or guess why, but for many years now, I have kept a running list of the books I read. Study is part of the "deal" for a priest (we actually make a vow "to be diligent in seeking the knowledge of such things as may make us stronger and more able ministers of Christ.")¹ Here are some of the titles on my current reading list:

- *The Future of Faith*, by Harvey Cox
- *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*, by Diana Butler Bass
- *A New Kind of Christianity*, by Brian McLaren
- *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (that would be as opposed to a narrow, strictly prescribed "orthodoxy") also by McLaren
- *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, by Phyllis Tickle

This May will mark the 30th anniversary of my ordination to the sacred order of priests. It is in turn, nearly 36 years since I entered Trinity College, Toronto as a first year "divine." I hardly need to tell you that the Church for whose ministry I prepared in 1975 was a very different institution than the one we know today. By contrast, here are some of the books which I was reading in the 1970s:

- *Dogma*, by Michael Schmaus (all six volumes)
- *The Summa Contra Gentiles* (four volumes by the 13th century theologian Thomas Aquinas, written to controvert the "heresies" of those targeted by the Inquisition)
- *Liturgy and Worship*, by Lowther & Clarke (1932) – an 868 page analysis of every revision to every English language prayer book right up to and including 1662

Clearly, the Church is concerning itself with different issues in 2011 than it was in 1975. In 1975, my job was to learn as much as I possibly could about the established teaching of the Church regarding scripture, doctrine, morals, and church history, so that I could pass these on to succeeding generations of Christians for their edification, and proper formation in the "true faith."

Here, however, is the rub. The truth is that notwithstanding the fairly conservative curricula of our theological colleges, by 1975, this project was doomed before it even began. For, those were heady and tumultuous days in the Anglican Church, and nowhere more than in the Buttery of Trinity College.

Some of you will remember.

The Church was emerging from a kind of cookie-cutter institutional conformity, where we were actually proud of the fact that you could walk into any Anglican Church anywhere in the world, and know the service by heart. It certainly wouldn't have occurred to you to check out the parish down the road. There was no need! We simply dropped the Queen and the Book of Common Prayer onto any would-be congregation of Anglicans, and presto!, they were one of us. But, no sooner was the ink dry on our beloved 1962 Prayer Book, than there erupted a proliferation of liturgical experimentation. These were the days of the "wee bookies." There was also a lot of truly reprehensible poetry set to even more reprehensible music.

But it wasn't just the liturgy which was in flux. Those were also the days we were piously unchurching each other over such issues as the ordination of women and the remarriage of divorced persons. We considered it a "great leap forward" (the apogee of ecumenical cooperation) when we decided that you no longer had to be an Anglican to receive communion in an Anglican Church.

¹ BAS, p. 647.

The Church was also busy reclaiming baptism as a sacrament of genuine religious commitment (and oh, how we complained that membership brought not only privileges, but obligations). This spelled the end of private baptisms on “second Sundays at 4.00,” and also marked the beginning of the admission of people to Communion on the basis of their baptism alone, no matter what their age. All of which left us wondering what Confirmation was for, anyway.

So-called “lay ministry” was all the rage – by which we meant not so much what the People of God (lay people) did in their daily vocation and ministry, but that we would now allow the un-ordained to read a lesson at church, or (if you were very forward-thinking) to assist in the administration of Communion.

But here is my point in reminding you of all this. If we believed that the tumultuous 70s were merely a blip, and that once we sorted out this little explosion of big issues, we could return to more a stable and predictable expression of Church, we were sorely mistaken.

As a young priest, trying to assist congregations to understand and adapt to the changes swirling about us, I often heard people say (all right, it was more like an accusation), “There’s enough change and chaos in my daily life. Church is my rock of stability: Please don’t make me deal with change at church, too.” I was left feeling as if *I* were somehow responsible for their unhappiness.

I now know that even had I wanted to, the change enveloping us was completely beyond our control – much larger than the innovations of a bunch of Christian hooligans and assistant curates – and that to try and stop it would be tantamount to trying to hold back Niagara Falls with a teaspoon.

It is now, as it was not then, a commonplace that we are living through one of the “hinge” times in the history of the Church – a period of about a century, which takes place every 500 years or so – and which gives rise to a new and stronger expression of Church. But not without birth pangs.

Further, it is essential to understand that this period of foment and change is not merely religious in nature, but belongs to a nexus of factors whose reach extends to every aspect of our life. If we think back 500 years to the Protestant Reformation, for example, with its insistence on getting “back to the Bible,” this could never have happened without the advent of the printing press, and the access to Scripture which this provided. Similarly, in our own day, if one aspect of the “coming Church” is a developing tolerance and appreciation for, let us say, the mystical and wisdom traditions of the East, this can only have come about with the advent of air travel, and immigration policies which have quite literally made the “the other” our neighbour. Do you honestly think we’d have allowed Yoga at Christ Church 35 years ago? Or a Meditation Group? Or a Rabbi to preach? But global travel, and satellite TV, and Google have brought us cheek by jowl with those of other religious traditions, and we learn. We learn.

In reality, the changes we witnessed 30 years ago were but Big Surf compared to the tidal wave of change enveloping our Church (and our world) today.

For example, the BAS, good as it was, has turned out to be but a stepping stone. We are once again in a period of bubbling liturgical renewal. Why, we ask, in the age of the internet, when there are hundreds of liturgical resources posted every day, some of them spectacularly beautiful, should we remain bound to the use of eight eucharistic prayers, just because we decided they were swell in 1985? But you realize what I am asking! I’m not just questioning the print-resources of the Book of Alternative Services. I am asking, only asking, if technology has rendered obsolete the very idea of a *book* of common prayer. This is a question which goes to the heart of Anglican spirituality – collects and

canticles learned by heart, and a little maroon prayer book on every night stand. I don't know the answer. But I do know that the question is on the table.

What we expect of our clergy has also continued to change. 30 years ago, the emphasis was shifting from a "pastoral model" (the ministry of compassion) to a "professional" model of ministry. The Minister no longer had a Study, but an Office. The Reverend Tara Livingston, who actually has *credentials* as a pastoral counselor (your credentials in my day were nothing more than your kindness, your wisdom, and your holiness of life), is a fine example of this shift in full flower. But even Tara and her classmates will attest to the fact that the Church, while continuing to value pastoral care, has pinned its hopes for the future on a different skill set, that of *leadership*. We now want our clergy to be people of vision, who can captivate the imagination of their parishioners, and bring people with them. This has indisputable consequences for what we expect our clergy to be doing with their time.

Another change – and we are witnessing this even now at Christ Church – is from an emphasis on believing all the right things about all the important topics to *mission*. It wasn't so long ago that the Christian Church saw its primary mission as "winning souls" for Christ, and that we could pray without embarrassment, "Prosper we pray thee all those who proclaim the gospel of thy kingdom among the nations."² Mission was about evangelism. But these days, we have recovered a sense of Jesus' own urgent mission, which was not to obtain the worship of his followers, but in the name of God, to rally them to remediate injustice, and suffering, and patronage, and elitism. In other words, the mission of the Church, if it is to be the mission of Jesus, is to build up the kingdom of God on earth. More than ever, the mainline Churches which are growing – Christ Church among them – are the Churches who are finding ways to take the needs and flaws of the world seriously. People want to belong to a community which is actually making a difference. Sometimes, this is symptomatic relief, such as our annual visit to St Mary's Cathedral to feed 600 homeless and hungry. Sometimes, the work we do is life-changing, as in assisting homeless families to transition to permanent housing, and all that getting off the first rung of Maslow's hierarchy of needs implies. And sometimes, our work targets the systemic and policy issues which give rise to poverty and other social ills in the first place – for example, the work of Faithful City in facilitating a coordinated response to Elder Abuse.

This, of course, doesn't obviate the need for proclamation. There's a story which goes with our mission (and if there weren't, we might just as well fold up our tent, and go join the Kiwanis, or some other worthy service club.) The reality is that we now have two entire "lost generations" – of parents, and now, their children – who have had no exposure to the Church or to the Christian story. Values which we take for granted are in fact no longer the *lingua franca* of our society. Please do not assume that just everybody agrees upon such Christian imperatives as forgiveness, the sanctity of life, the sanctity of a confidence, self-sacrifice, charitable giving, volunteering, the perils of wealth, and so on. These values are an important gift to a civil society, and we dare not keep them to ourselves. But more than this, despite the many protestations of those who are "spiritual but not religious," what passes for spirituality in our un-churched, or perhaps I should say "un-faithed," society, is pretty thin gruel indeed – it could use a bit of schooling, and thickening up. Spirituality and meaning just happen to be the currency in which we deal. So, how do we get the word out? How do we get to people where they are (which I remind you, isn't here!) – but listening to their iPods, tweeting, FaceBooking, Googling? We run some fine educational programs *in* this church: is there some way we could run them *out of* it? The story of God and of humankind has been, from the very beginning, a tale of communication, of still small voices, of tablets of stone, of prophetic and angelic announcements, of God's word written, and of the Word made flesh. Is it not shocking that the Church of all institutions should be rushing to play "catch-up" in finding new and effective ways to *communicate* the gospel?

² BCP, p. 76

One of the features of our contemporary life is how crazy-busy we all are. And it starts early, in childhood – with co-curricular and extra-curricular activities which turn parents (or nannies) into full-time time-managers. There just aren't enough days in the week. We even tried adding Sunday to the days available for shopping, and hockey, and skiing, and making money – and there *still* aren't enough days in the week. Now quite apart from the larger question whether it's time for someone to blow the whistle on this madness, our frenetic lives have had an enormous impact on the voluntary sector. Volunteers, for the most part, are simply not available the way they once were. And when they do have time to give, they are really not interested in meeting for the sake of meeting, or licking envelopes. They tend not to want "life sentences" but rather, short term projects where they can be in and out, and feel that they are making a meaningful contribution using their particular skill set. Churches and other organizations who depend heavily upon volunteers need to recruit and deploy volunteers more carefully than ever. And, we need to expect to pay for work which volunteers are now unavailable or unwilling to do. Christ Church, for example, is unbelievably fortunate to have an Operations Steward (in the person of David Evans) and a Treasurer (Sheila Wares) each of whom give countless hours per week undertaking work which requires time and expertise which most of us do not have. I do not believe it is wise to assume that we will always be this lucky. The volunteer landscape is changing.

In fact, almost everything is changing, and for good or for ill, we are the generation who happen to living at a hinge of history.

I keep a cartoon in my desk drawer. Two dinosaurs are chatting with each other. Off in the distance is a very large boat, and its passengers, creatures of every kind, are queued up two by two, to clamber aboard. And one dinosaur turns to the other and says, "Oh crap. Was that today?"

In these days of uncertainty and change, it is virtually impossible to guess where we will end up. There are too many twists and turns, high places and stumbly places; there is too far to go; and there is no map, for we are the first to take this particular journey.

So, my friends, I do not know where this ark is headed, but I do know that I want Christ Church to be on board.

We know what happened to the dinosaurs! Our job is to hang on for dear life to the things that absolutely must be delivered intact to a generation yet unborn, and to learn to sit light to the rest. I do know that our God is faithful, and will not let us be tested beyond what we can bear (1 Corinthians 10.13). And in the mean time, may ours be an excellent adventure.

As the Psalmist says, "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it" (Psalm 118.24).

Respectfully submitted,

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