

A missiological viewpoint

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This document is written in the first person, by an author who declares her social position to be that of a middle-class, heterosexual female Canadian of white Anglo-Saxon descent. I've been ordained for more than 17 years. Although I consider myself a seven sacrament priest (raised Anglo-Catholic), I also enjoy alignment with a Reformed ecclesiological approach, along with claiming a more liberal social theology. I am a cradle Anglican who has faith community experience in rural, town and urban contexts. A parish priest for more than 12 years, I have held the position of Diocesan Parish Vitality Coordinator for the past five years. Our Diocese has 96 parishes with 224 congregations (42 rural; 21 urban; 33 exurban/small town). About half are multipoint parishes. There are 127 active clergy.

This essay aims to address issues related to Eucharistic Practice and Sacramental Theology with a missiological viewpoint and from an applied theology framework. In particular, it will attempt to advocate for those who do not yet have a voice in our faith tradition. (The assumption being, that the voices of those who are already full or even partial-participating members of the Anglican Church of Canada will be well represented by others through this exercise.) It is the offering of one person and may not reflect nor represent that of others in this Diocese. The following points are offered for thoughtful and prayerful consideration:

1. Missional Priority

Most frequently, the voices of those we seek to serve, love and introduce to Christ are not reflected in this kind of corporate work. Frankly this enterprise, as important and noble as it may be, is mostly 'insider' activity. My greatest concern is that our church leaders will be consumed and distracted with internal (albeit meaningful) liturgical policies and practices solely intended for existing parishioners. The limited precious resources

of energy, time and funds may be deployed unwisely while substantial inroads to missional ministry are being neglected.

The case may well be argued that we enjoy, are most familiar with, and comfortable when we Canadian Anglicans are investing in a worship issue rather than pivoting to the more difficult, unfamiliar and riskier work of *mission*.¹

Frequently I reflect on an illustration shared by Canon Dr. George Lings several years ago. Lings is an ordained Anglican and church growth researcher who wrote the first draft of *Mission-shaped Church*, a truly ground-breaking report (Church House Publishing, 2004). He said that our ministry today is that reality of the *reversed* Parable of the Lost Sheep (Mt 18:12-14). We have one sheep with 99 who are astray. Our gospel imperative is to pursue the latter.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury and social reformer, William Temple famously said, “The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.”²

Leaders throughout the Anglican Church of Canada may be tempted at this time to fixate on self-preservation. There is a danger for us as we endeavour to save ourselves by continuing to devote our energies to what we best know and (personally) dearly love. Another author and Church of England missional leader (retired) Bishop Graham Cray anonymously quotes an Australian Archbishop: “More of the same means less of the same.”³

We note that Jesus frequently critiqued the faith leaders of his day for concentrating on traditional religious practices, demanding precise adherence, while missing the missional call to be bearers of Gospel. Here is Jesus’ own mission statement:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.
(Lk 4:18-19)

¹ There may be some unfamiliarity or discomfort with this term mission. Call it what we may (title it anything), we need to learn to actively live into our identity as a missional church and pursue this ministry imperative. See Addendum for definitions.

² New World Encyclopedia, William Temple
https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/William_Temple#cite_note-7

³ Freshly Expressed Church by Bishop Graham Cray, Taken from the Lent address given at Derby Cathedral on Monday 27 February 2012; <https://derby.anglican.org/en/freshly-expressed-church-by-bishop-graham-cray.html>

Are we at risk of losing our Anglican Christian identity and purpose by concentrating on the minutiae of sacramental worship during a pandemic?

It is an absolute truth that Holy Eucharist is central to our Anglican identity and worship life together. It binds us and nurtures us. However, I suggest that the Holy Spirit may be calling us to a continued Eucharistic fast (die to self) so as to reclaim our identity as a people of mission, prioritizing our service (give life) to others.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

(Mk 8:35)

Perhaps this season of fasting from the sacrament of Eucharist can be viewed similarly to a year (or more) of sabbatical Jubilee, so as to reorder our priorities for missional ministry?

We as exiles, are being given permission and opportunity during this restricted isolation from ordinary congregational life, to 'return' to the Anglican faith basics of homeland, lie fallow and offer gracious care (the Gospel of life) to those who need it. Instead of binding ourselves up with refined (and unusual) sacramental protocols, this instead can be a time of release.

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month - on the day of atonement - you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property.

(Lev 25:8-13)

As wise stewards of this faith tradition, are we being called as church to sabbatical? To pause, self-reflect and identify just who we are and what is our purpose before we pursue this next chapter in our Canadian Anglican Church life together?

2. Eucharist: Another barrier?

Our congregations are shattered, dispersed and isolated due to the pandemic health restrictions. In-person worship (and even some of our online versions) is highly (if not solely) focused on our existing members. Reservations and private invitations are shared primarily with previously identified ‘regulars’ from the parish list. In pre-COVID-19 times it was incredibly difficult to be a newcomer in our congregations, especially if we have little or no liturgical experience. The ‘nones’ and ‘dones’, if they have any interest at all in Anglican faith life, will be even more encumbered in their search for belonging and full participation as we add another layer of additional hygienic Eucharistic practice to our worship gatherings.

How can we offer seekers easy-to-traverse on-ramps and wide-open bridges into our Anglican community and rich worship life without losing our collective Eucharistic memory? How can we renew our Anglican Canadian core identity while not participating in our normal (pre-COVID) liturgies, yet respond missionally?

Nurturing and growing a sense of authentic, trusting, engaging faith community can be our priorities as we seek to live into Marks #1 and #2 of the Marks of Mission (To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom – TELL; To teach, baptise and nurture new believers – TEACH). Open-ended invitations, radical hospitality, building genuine relationships, and permission to explore Anglican Christian life, teaching and spiritual practice are pathways to energize existing parishioners and expand our reach with the nones and dones. This involves listening, loving service and joining God in the neighbourhood, along with respectful, relevant Christian formation opportunities.

Illustration: When we experienced the restrictive COVID-19 lockdown in mid-March in our province, my husband and I contacted about a dozen people we knew who had been active in local Anglican congregations but no longer participated. A few had moved neighbourhoods. One had medical issues and is disabled. Another was grieving the death of a spouse. A couple of them had just drifted out of ‘Churchland’ over time. All were disconnected from faith community.

We began gathering on Zoom weekly for what we called ‘Deep Dives’, almost two hours of rigorous scripture exploration, posing hard questions, offering our vulnerabilities and pastoral support. We were clear that this was not ‘a church thing’, nor did we discuss any longing for Eucharist or liturgical formality. Our prayers together and simple moments of worship nurtured us through the difficult time of pandemic

isolation. The group is reforming this fall by intentionally inviting more nones and dones. This faith community virtual gathering is providing a grounding of active Anglican spiritual life for the members in this virus season. Clearly, Deep Dives is not a substitute for sharing Eucharist and the sacramental life in congregation. It is, however, an oasis or rally to our basic spiritual identities as relational beings who long for a deeper reality with God and with one another. It is a ‘return’ to the homebase of Anglican faith community.

Truly authentic, welcoming, inclusive and mutually-participatory community is essential today in all contexts. Loneliness, depression, anxiety and emotional desolation are a plague in and of themselves during this era, exasperated by pandemic restrictions. *How can we in this Jubilee time, simply meet people where they are (where God is), join together and rediscover this God of loving acceptance and restoration? As Anglican Archbishop Mark MacDonald says, mission is about “our understanding of what God is doing in the world.”*⁴

There will be plenty of time to resume our beautiful eucharistic celebrations, baptisms, etc. This interval of sabbatical Jubilee is a *gift* in providing us an opportunity to pause and reorient ourselves as church in the Anglican tradition in an unfolding change era. We have a chance to pause and focus on deep discernment.

Will we regret not taking the time to consider our purpose and mission, rather than continually focusing on sacramental practices and liturgies that fewer and fewer people are appreciating?

3. Reconciliation

One of our often overlooked and underappreciated sacraments in the Anglican Church of Canada is that of The Reconciliation of a Penitent. It is the one that does not require physical closeness and can easily be practiced as people are restricted or isolated. The outward sign—words—is easily transmissible by Zoom, the phone and with two-metre in-person distancing. This holy rite of private confession and related counselling, can also provide life-changing healing and liberation for the penitent and in their relationships with others.

For many people COVID-19 has exposed the hurts, pains and burdens that are carried due to various situations of un-forgiveness. In my parish experience when we advertised in the wider community and through congregational notices that there would be opportunity to explore forgiveness themes the interest and participation was substantial.

⁴ The meaning of mission is changing: National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop Mark MacDonald. www.anglican.ca/marks/meaningofmission

One of the highlights of an annual youth retreat in our Diocese was always the service of Reconciliation. People of all ages and walks of life stagger under the weight of unresolved wrongs, troubling memories and mistakes. How many individuals, families, workplaces, communities and congregations could be transformed if we were more intentional and open to sharing this rite of God's grace?!

Reconciliation is also a perfect occasion to share about salvation history - the life, death and resurrection of Christ - and God's absolute merciful gift of forgiveness. This is not only a pastoral office to offer long-time Anglicans, but also an invitation to newcomers to explore this extravagant grace. In other words, this sacrament could be a missional opportunity!