German Christmas Eve
a family-friendly service
‘accessible to everyone’

By Matthew Townsend
Communications Missioner

An annual gathering at Holy Trinity Cathedral offers Quebec City residents and visitors a laid-back option for celebrating Christmas: a German Christmas Eve service.

The 5 p.m. trilingual Familien-gottesdienst service—in German, French and English—started shortly after the Very Rev. Christian Schreiner began as dean in 2008. “I got an email from a German young mother living in the city who said, ‘I heard rumours that you might actually have some German,’” Schreiner says.

The priest responded that he is a German pastor. “She said, ‘That’s brilliant. Do you think there’s any way we could have a German Christmas service?’”

The two started the service together, inviting German friends and encouraging them to tell others. In the first year, more than 100 people showed up, to their surprise.

The service grew: it went bilingual in year two. “Then it became a tourist thing, too, and people come from out of town, people come from the villages around the city.”

Around 160 people came last year, and the parish has considered its role in Creation. For more, see page 3.

Canon theologian: ‘What do we imagine human beings are for?’

By Matthew Townsend
Communications Missioner

This year, the Rev. Canon Jeffrey Metcalfe, canon theologian for the Diocese of Quebec, began working in a one-third-time capacity as interim priest at St. Michael’s, Sillery. Metcalfe—who spends the remaining two-thirds of his professional time as canon while completing his Ph.D. and raising two children with his partner—recently spoke with the Gazette about balancing his diverse workload.

How did you come to work at St. Michael’s?

My work at St. Michael’s in Sillery has come out of one of the four principle points of my work.

When my position was originally proposed within the diocese, they gave me four tasks. One was serving as a theological advisor to the bishop and to the leadership on various levels of structure. So I sit on Diocesan Executive Council—not as a voting member, but to be there, in a sense, as a witness, one with a particular set of theological skills.

Another piece is discipleship, formation and education. I’ve helped to design a couple of sabbatical programs now, including for the dean and Director General Marie-Sol Gaudreau, whose sabbatical was a pilgrimage.

Another is ecclesial vocational discernment. That’s having discussions with parishes. I’ve done one of those discussions in the Deanery of Quebec with St. Peter’s, Stoneham, which was under discernment for a while as to whether it wanted to continue or close. We ended up creating a ministry based on the liturgical calendar combined with Creation. I’ve worked also with a similar reflection-based model in the Eastern Townships with St. Luke’s, Magog, which came to the conclusion that it would be more faithful, in their case, to leave their building and start meeting in different locations. That’s the kind of conversation I help to facilitate, with the local priests involved.

St. Michael’s has been the third case of working with the church, I worship with them when I can, and I conduct interviews and facilitate group discussions. With those experiences, I then write a theological reflection, reflecting back what I’ve heard them say, especially the theological and biblical themes that come out in their own reflections. I deliver it back to them, hearing their input.

The people at St. Michael’s have had something like 10 priests in 12 years. So it was really fascinating engaging in discussion with them and hearing the kind of harm that that does to a community, when you’re constantly having transitions. That marks a congregation. Very interestingly, because of that constant transition, they’ve become a highly resilient community. They’re able to put together liturgies, they’re able to lead worship, they’re able to gather together in fellowship—all those things without direct clerical supervision. They do them because as disciples of Jesus, that’s the kind of people they are.

St. Michael’s, like a lot of our churches, is also struggling with declining resources. At times, people, but also degrading properties that need to be maintained. How do they take up the gifts that their unique history has given them?

This all lead to a report, and one of the major aspects that came out of the report was that for those gifts of resilience to maintained, they did require stable leadership. At the same time, Fr. Thomas Nitiavimun-da, who was there as an interim priest, was also in conversation with the bishop about engaging in his ministry—the new intercultural ministry.

What was clear was that for Thomas to be able to launch that ministry, it would be really necessary for him to give it full attention. At the same time, we recognized that people at St. Michael’s had experienced many transitions and that another one would be quite harmful. In conversation with them, with the bishop, because I had already been working with them under my diocesan profile for about a year, it made sense that if a new interim were needed, it could be me.

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From The Bishop

Great expectations

Advent isn’t about getting ready for Christmas. It’s about getting ready for the end of the world as we know it.

During the few weeks leading up to the celebration of Jesus’ first coming among us as a child in Bethlehem, we are called to reflect on Christ’s return—the return we anticipate every time we recite the creed and say that we believe that Jesus will come again “to judge the living and the dead.”

But what will his second coming look like? Will it be fire and brimstone falling from the sky, the faithful elect being plucked up while the rest fall through the cracks in the earth to tumble down to an eternity of groaning and grinding of teeth?

None of us can be sure until it happens, of course. But the gospel suggests that isn’t exactly the kind of return Jesus has in mind. When Jesus returns, he doesn’t say we should cover, or take cover, or head for the hills. No, when he speaks of his coming again in the gospel according to Luke, for example, he says that we should stand up and raise our heads, because our “redemption is drawing near.”

So Christ won’t be returning like an angry parent ready to give us the ultimate ground because we’ve been misbehaving while he was away, because we’ve made a mess of the house left in our care.

But we have made a mess of what’s been entrusted to us. Things have not turned out the way God intended. Things have gone terribly wrong, and the evidence is all around us. But even in the face of the mess we’ve helped make, our God remains loving, steadfast, and—most importantly—forgiving. It is because things had gone wrong that Jesus came. As Jesus says elsewhere in the gospels, he came “to seek and to save that which was lost.” He came to seek and save us.

This is the journey we’re on in Advent. We can’t get to Christmas without going through Advent first. We can’t celebrate the birth of Christ without first remembering why God had to become one of us—without remembering our fall, our sinfulness, and our complete and utter inability to pull ourselves out of it on our own.

That’s why Jesus came in the first place. That’s why he’s coming again. And that’s why this is good news, not something to be afraid of.

When “the Son of Man comes in clouds with great power and glory”—whatever that will actually look like—it will bring to full completion God’s rule on earth. In Advent we look to that moment when Christ the King will return, not to destroy our imperfect world, but to bring it to perfection—where all our broken relationships are mended, nature is made clean again, the rich and poor are the same, the maine are made whole, and the dead are given new life. When Christ the King returns, it will be to bring in the fullness of God’s kingdom, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Advent is all about having great expectations. What we anticipate on these days before Christmas is not the advent of our doom, but the advent of our redemption—and the redemption of all creation.
CONSIDERING CREATION

The dionsaurs did not have choices. We do.

By the Rev. Cynthia Patterson
Incumbent for parishes of Gaspé and the Magdalen Islands

On Oct. 27, three Anglicans, one United Church person, and one Roman Catholic walked together and held a flag of the earth viewed from space as we participated in Gaspé’s contribution to the international climate marches. We joined about 400 other people, including a contingent of Galicians and teachers from the Gaspé Poly’s English sector, groups, and individuals greatly concerned about the climate crisis deepening day by day. Students from the Francophone schools provided an additional presence as large numbers snaked across the base of the mountaintop behind the Cegep, forming their own march. The women who work for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Gaspé walked with the Réseau des femmes. Representatives from the Public Health Agency were among the speakers, analysing the current and projected health risks for everyone, especially the young, the old, and those living in difficult financial circumstances.

Congregational responses to the bishop’s letter on the climate march were, for the most part, sadly predictable: silence, charges that church has no place in marches, climate change denial. I felt extremely depressed. The silence was the worst of it. I remembered the quotation which has been attributed to several different people: “All it takes for evil to prevail is for good people to do/say nothing.”

When you read this article, we will be in the season of Advent, preparing and waiting for the celebration of Jesus’s birth. We are also waiting for ourselves as Christians to wake up for Jesus, to wake up and exercise the first directive given to us by God: to be responsible for the gift of Creation.

Once again St. John’s and St. Philip (Sandy Beach) opened its doors to dogs and humans for the Parish of Gaspé’s Blessing of the Animals service, held two days after the feast of St. Francis.

The first reading was the Creation Story. Surely central to the miracle of Creation is that all life was created in unity. We know now through DNA that the very structure of our beings is largely shared with all life on this planet.

Prayers included that of Albert Schweitzer’s for the animals. People shared moving stories about their dogs and what they mean in their lives. All were blessed. We remembered one little dog, a regular attender, who

Stay then!—out there
And yet how bid ye gone?

Among the beasts You may find room.
Maye and one a truns
To lie upon.

The verses suggest that present-day society—that is 1919—and present-day attitudes would no longer offer accommodation even in a stable were the Holy Family to come seeking lodgings:

Place have we none; The place is packed
And yet how bid ye go? We scarce have room.
Stay them!—out there For our own selves,

The poem is written by John Oxenham, author of the familiar hymn “In Christ There Is No East or West,” and standing as it does in the Christmas issue of the Diocesan Gazette it produces a chilling effect on the 21st-century reader who cannot help but see it in the context of the present-day displacement of people seeking places where they can find shelter at a time of urgency.

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What would we say in A.D. 2019?

By Mech Reimer Wright
Diocesan Historian

There is something very odd about the December 1919 issue of the Diocesan Gazette. When this reader viewed it the first time, she checked the page numbers to be sure none were missing. It seemed hardly possible that it could be complete. There was no mention of Christmas. No picture of the Christ child in the manager. No mention of plans for celebrations or services. No allusions to decorations for halls and churches. No mentions of gifts for the children. Nothing.

Toward the end of the issue, however, there is, a poem which has Christmas associations, albeit sombre and thought-provoking. It is titled The Inn of Life, and more significantly, subtitled As it was in the Beginning—

As it was in the Beginning—
Is Now,—
And ……?

The poem is presented in a very able manner ‘The Christmas Cantata’, December 23rd, when the Sunday school children presented in a very able manner ‘The Christmas Cantata,’ after which Santa Claus appeared and delivered the good things from off the tree. As the church in Island Brook was actually St. John’s and not Christ Church, this is somewhat puzzling. It is impossible at the present time to find out how the new editor’s first Christmas number was received, but in 1920 the December issue not only opened with ‘The Bishop’s Christmas Greetings,’ but also contained a picture of Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus; a reprint of the poem by John Oxenham, author of the familiar hymn “In Christ There Is No East or West,” and standing as it does in the Christmas issue of the Diocesan Gazette it produces a chilling effect on the 21st-century reader who cannot help but see it in the context of the present-day displacement of people seeking places where they can find shelter at a time of urgency.

December 1919 was not devoid of news, however. There is a report that on Dec. 1 “at Kent House, Montmorency Falls, a most pleasing banquet was tendered to the men of St. Matthew’s Church who served in the Great War by the men of the parish who were obliged to remain at home by circumstances over which they had no control but who had, nevertheless, done their bit in support of their fellows at the front.”

On that same day there was a “Lazenby’s Missionary Banquet in connection with the 94th anniversary of Trinity Church [Quebec]” which was held in the church hall and presided over by Mr. W. Wilkinson.

Also in December, but reported in the January issue, the Rev. Frederick George LeGallais wrote to Bishop Williams from Bonne-Éspérance on the progress of his mission on the Lower North Shore. He had, that same year, been appointed to Mutton Bay.

We are now [on Dec. 4] in the grip of winter.” LeGal-
Dying like a (beautiful, talented) dog

By Louisa Blair
Columnist

Christmas can be a time of warm fuzzy feelings. I love singing all the carols that I’ve known since I was a child. I love the young mother in her blue dress, surrounded by cuddly animals, holding her tiny baby in the lowly stable, with her humble hubby beside her.

But what does it mean, this familiar story of a poor woman giving birth in a stable? God has come to dwell with us and to share our vulnerability. The Creator of the world being a tiny baby in a stable turns our idea of an ultimate power completely upside down. How do I respond to that? A few decades later, the story turns violent. The same mother watches her son, God-with-us, being tortured and killed as a religious fanatic and leader of a rebel movement. What does the story mean now? How do I respond now?

As I write this column, Donald Trump claims proudly that he has just killed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, another religious fanatic, in a rebel movement. After a gunfight, troops sent a weaponized robot and dogs, trained to sniff out explosives and attack, into a dead-end tunnel to hunt him down. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi detonated his explosive vest, killing himself and three children he had taken with him.

Trump said that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had died a cowardly death, “like a dog.” He also mentioned that no American soldiers were injured, except one dog. “A beautiful dog” added Trump, “a talented dog.” But when he said Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had died “like a dog” he did not at all mean like the beautiful, talented dog that had chased him down the tunnel. He meant that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi died miserably and shamefully, with no dignity. Scared to death as any dumb animal would be. As I certainly would be if a weaponized robot and attack dogs were chasing me down a dead-end tunnel. The beautiful, talented dog, on the other hand, was injured in the call of duty, defending the western world.

Trump calculated his dog words carefully to conjure two main emotional reactions to this story: 1) a huge outpouring of sentimental concern for the beautiful and talented dog who was injured (tonight Trump released a photo), and 2) vengeful pleasure in the humiliating death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

But in fact, one of the great mysteries that God revealed through that adorable Christmas baby was that God loves Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as much as God loves you and me. God’s love rains down on the just and the unjust. I find this a hard thing to take in, in relation to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He was responsible for the torture and death of so many people. If it were me with a gun going after him down the tunnel, and not a robot or a dog, would I have killed him? This is an immensely difficult question. But so much simpler to resolve if I can just call him a dog, a pig, or a cockroach.

And feeling weepy and emotional makes me feel good, too, as though I’m a sensitive and caring person. Immersed in my emotions, I don’t have to change my mind or my perspective. The feelings make no further demands on my self-image, my intellect, or my time. They are an end in themselves.

If I take action to change the situation that makes me weep, I will probably meet obstacles that will reveal me as a way less caring and noble person than I thought. Better to just stay in the emotions. And this fits well with the narcissism of North American culture, where emotions are the ultimate authority and must be heard and served.

But Christ, our true but upside-down king, does not let us stay there, crowning triumphantly over a dying man or weeping tenderly over an injured dog. Let us not only wonder at the beauty and violence of Jesus’ life, but at what more these strange mysteries are asking of us.

What's ahead in 2020?
One of the things we’ve grown increasingly concerned about is the elephant in the room of Quebec society: Bill 21. Looking at religious symbols in public spaces and what kinds of people do we think can work for the state, and can they have religious signification.

Increasingly, we hear talk of things like a “values test”—these things are, from my perspective as a theologian, really deeply disturbing. As soon as you start getting to assigning what kinds of values are Quebeccois or fitting of Quebec citizens, we start having to choose who gets to define those values, what kinds of people count as Quebeccois, and what sorts of symbols are okay and are not. All of these, in the end, get back to theological anthropology: What do we imagine human beings are for?

If the state starts defining who can legitimately belong here, based on their values, I’m going to really wonder on what their imagining is around what human creatures are. As Christians, we make certain claims around what it means to be people and how we think Jesus speaks to us, of who God is calling us to be.

Another piece, which is related, is around questions of the things that most communities can already point to and what resources are there, both in terms of reflection but also in action.

In our community, here’s a problem that we’re dealing with. There’s an ongoing political and economic debate on the feasibility of that road. One of the questions we’re asking—and it came to Diocesan Executive Council at the last face-to-face meeting—is how can we speak to this as a church? Both in terms of helping to support and advocate, but also, what is it as Christians that we specifically bring to the table? What unique, value-added things do Christians have to say, rather than just repeating the kind of discourse that’s already in the contested sphere?

How can the diocese engage you?
I’m always looking for partnerships. Because the methodology I use in both theological reflection and in vocational discernment is ethnographic, it means I look for invitations to enter into conversations that are already happening. If there’s a community that wants to explore an issue or to engage in its own kind of discernment, that community can contact me.

In a few cases, the discernment has orbited questions on whether it makes sense to keep a certain parish structure open—because that’s what those folks wanted help with. But it could be also a question of: In our community, here’s a problem that we’re dealing with. How can the church help us with that issue? What resources are there, both in terms of reflection but also in action.

For me, the most exciting work is to help congregations and help individuals look at their gifts and address the things that most communities can already point to as important. You just have to think: What are the people around you most afraid of? What do the people around you deeply love? You want to talk about values tests— you can ask those questions, and we ought to all be asking these questions of our surroundings.