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It was an exhausting and distressing time for many of us. Especially difficult was when it wasn't possible to be at a parishioner's or loved one's side in their final moments, or when funerals had to be delayed or their attendance heavily restricted.

And yet there were moments of grace in the midst of it all. In an instant, our diocese went digital. Every Sunday, from March 15, 2020 (the first Sunday following the declaration of a global pandemic) until June 26, 2022, "Home Prayers" were streamed on the diocesan Facebook page, along with additional services for Holy Week and Christmas—190 online services in total prepared and presented by clergy from across our diocese, most of whom had never once led an online service in their lives. (And those don't count the other online offerings prepared in individual parishes.) Hundreds (and, in the first months of the pandemic, thousands) of people from across the Diocese of Quebec (and beyond) viewed the services (or listened in by telephone) and even developed a unique form of fellowship in the comments section of each online service. It was no permanent substitute for in-person worship, but it clearly helped sustain many in their forced isolation, attracted people online who rarely if ever darken the doors of our churches, and created an unprecedented sense of communion across the vast geographic expanse of the diocese.

A few months into the pandemic, in May of 2020, I wrote the following in my report to the Diocesan Executive Council (DEC): "The church that emerges from the other side of this pandemic will not be the same church that went into it—not in Quebec, not anywhere. Nor will the world that emerges from the other side of this pandemic be the same as before."

One proof of that is that when the health emergency ended, and our church buildings were finally able to open as they had before COVID-19, not everyone came back. Across the entire Anglican Church of Canada, there has been a 26 percent drop in Sunday attendance since the pandemic, and other religious groups report similar reductions in participation.

During the course of the pandemic, a number of congregations in the diocese asked to close. The responsibilities of maintaining a building and all of the related costs were growing increasingly great for an increasingly small number of faithful (often elderly) parishioners. These decisions are rarely easy to make, but they reflect what I call a pragmatism laced with hope—a pragmatism that acknowledges that it's okay to set down a burden of maintenance that has become too much to carry for too few people; hope that the funds generated by the sale of some of these properties will help support Anglican ministry in our patch of God's kingdom for generations to come, and that the Church will nevertheless continue her life and work.

Early on in my time as your bishop, some informal guiding principles were developed to help orient the diocesan leadership in our decision making. They include the following, which you might call a kind of "vision statement": "We strive to cultivate a vibrant and sustainable Anglican Christian presence in eastern and central Quebec."

It's simple and straightforward, and perhaps also sounds naïve or unrealistic as we confront declining attendance, closing churches, and shrinking finances. But if you don't think there's potential for a vibrant and sustainable Anglican Christian presence in our part of the world—if you think there's no potential for our church to grow numerically, rather than just continue to shrink—I'd invite you to look at the latest census.

It says (unsurprisingly) that there aren't a lot of Anglicans in the province of Quebec these days. A little less than one percent of all Quebecers (0.7%) self-identify as Anglicans (55,290 out of a total population of 8,308,480). Nearly three-quarters of Quebecers who self-identify as Anglicans are located in and around metropolitan Montreal. Just over 10% of the province's Anglicans (just over 6,000) live within the geographical bounds of the Diocese of Quebec, concentrated in clusters in the Eastern Townships, Quebec City, the Gaspé Peninsula, and the North Shore—our four geographic deaneries.

Our own statistics suggest that the number of “active” Anglicans in our diocese is just over 1,300 (a number I know to be inaccurately low because a number of parishes don't provide complete statistical returns each year). That suggests that there are at least a few thousand people in our communities who we rarely or never see in our churches, but who nevertheless consider themselves somehow a part of us. In those numbers I see opportunity, possibility, potential, and hope.

Someone else who sees those things for our church in this time and place is Jesse Zink, an Anglican theologian and principal of Montreal Dio, who we welcomed at our last Synod, too. He'll be sharing with us on Saturday a vision of what it might mean, in a world beset by rapid change and unrelenting crises, to be a church that is creative, faithful, and hopeful.

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Even as we seek to draw new people into our fellowship, we are mindful of the need to nourish those who are already a part of our church communities, and to help them deepen their Christian understanding, commitment, and engagement so they can still better join in the work of revealing God's kingdom in our midst. At the Lambeth Conference in 2022, the bishops of the Anglican Communion recommitted our churches to a “season of intentional discipleship.” This means making a still more concerted effort to help those already a part of our church grow in their Christian faith so they can live as fully as possible what is sometimes described as a “Jesus-shaped life.”

It was striking (and also strangely encouraging) to hear bishops at the Lambeth Conference who come from fast-growing churches in the Global South say things like, “We make disciples but we don't nurture them; we baptize people but we don't see them again,” or to describe the Christian commitment of many of their members as “a mile wide and an inch deep.” These are descriptions that sometimes resemble our own situation here in Quebec.

There is no catch-all program or formula for Anglican Christian discipleship formation; it is highly contextual. In their reports to Synod, Canon Theologian Jeffrey Metcalfe and Canon for Lay Ministries Giuseppe Gagliano have outlined some of the ways we've attempted, at a diocesan level, to help our people grow into a life of genuine Christian discipleship, and plans for new kinds of Christian formation still to come—using the gifts already present in the people of our diocese, and building on lessons learned during the pandemic about using technology to bring people together across great distance.

In the midst of all of the other preoccupations and demands on our attention, energy, and resources as a church, it can be easy to forget that making and nurturing disciples of Jesus Christ is really what we're supposed to be about. As fellow Anglican

C.S. Lewis once put it, “The church exists for nothing else but to draw [people] into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, [then] all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became [human] for no other purpose.”

* * *

As always, much good work is being carried out in every corner of the diocese, a lot of it happening in quiet and unheralded ways. If you haven’t already, I strongly encourage you to read the written reports provided to you over the past few weeks, which recount in detail the mission and ministry being lived out in a variety of ways by our diocese’s dedicated clergy and faithful laity.

One story I would like to share does not appear in any of those reports, but is of importance to our diocesan life. By now most of us are well acquainted with the Anglican Church of Canada’s participation in the residential school system, which forcibly removed Indigenous children from their communities as part of a state-sponsored program of assimilation and cultural genocide.

One such school operated in our diocese, in La Tuque, between 1963 and 1978. A nine-year-old girl named Juliette Rabbitskin died of pneumonia during an outbreak at the school in 1966. Though from the Cree community of Mistissini (about 500 kilometres north of La Tuque), her body was buried by Anglican clergy in the Anglican cemetery in La Tuque—without Juliette’s parents even being informed of their daughter’s death. They found out months later, from their other children, when they returned home for the summer, without Juliette.

Among the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is, when requested by the family, the reburial in their home communities of children who died at residential schools. Our diocese’s participation in this repatriation process began in 2021, working with the family, the provincial and federal governments, and the Cree Nation. Juliette’s body was exhumed from the La Tuque Anglican cemetery on September 20 of this year, and her earthly remains were reburied in Mistissini on September 30, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. At the invitation of the Rabbitskin family, I was present on both occasions, and offered a formal public apology to the family, to the survivors of the La Tuque residential school, and to the Cree Nation.

Reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples and communities our church has harmed is a long and uneven journey. Helping bring Juliette home was a small but significant step on that journey. Emily Rabbitskin, who attended the residential school with her cousin Juliette, said this after the reburial: “It’s like a load from my soul was lifted, that’s how happy I was. [...] I felt peace after.”

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Our last diocesan Synod explicitly mandated two tasks to be completed before we met again.

One was a “request that the Bishop of Quebec authorize the solemnization of the marriage of same-sex couples in the Diocese of Quebec.” Notwithstanding the overwhelming vote in favour of this motion in 2019, I asked Synod for time to consult with some in the diocese who might find such an innovation challenging, in hopes of

developing a policy that both honours Synod's request and the consciences of those who do not agree with it.

The result is a new diocesan policy on marriage that took effect on July 1 of this year. It is grounded in a set of affirmations adopted by the 2019 General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, which had the effect of permitting individual dioceses to exercise a so-called "local option" with respect to offering same-sex marriage in the church. The new policy seeks to respond to Synod's request by stating simply and clearly our diocese's guidelines on marriage, regardless of the genders of those being wedded. The policy reiterates an existing long-standing provision which does not oblige any minister to act contrary to their conscience in presiding over any marriage—again, regardless of the genders of those being wedded.

The second task mandated by the last Synod was "to critically examine, review and edit the Constitution and Canons of this diocese in order to propose amendments to the next Ordinary Session of the Synod of the Diocese of Quebec."

An incredibly diligent and dedicated six-person Constitution and Canons Working Group was duly appointed by the Diocesan Executive Council and began its work in the fall of 2020, meeting online no fewer than 70 times to come up with the proposals that will take up the bulk of Synod's time tomorrow. They represent the first major overhaul of our constitution and canons in a generation—and they are long overdue.

If the idea of constitutional and canonical amendments doesn't exactly get your blood racing, try thinking of our diocesan constitution and canons like your computer, smartphone, or tablet, each of which uses an operating system—whether its Windows, iOS, or Android. When they're kept up to date, they operate smoothly in the background, letting you do what you need to do. But you know what happens when you don't do those updates? Your device slows down, software bugs accumulate, certain things don't work, or it crashes.

Our diocesan constitution and canons are a bit like that. Occasional patches and upgrades over the years have helped, but now we're at the point where we require an entirely new operating system—one that allows us to be more nimble, and one that reflects the church we are today and expect to be in the future, rather than the church we haven't been for generations.

Computers, smartphones, and tablets aren't ends in themselves. They're tools that allow us to do things. The same goes for our constitution and canons. As stated in one of the documents that guided the working group: "[Canon] law exists to assist a church in its mission and witness to Jesus Christ. A church needs within its laws to order, and so facilitate, its public life and to regulate its own affairs for the common good. Law is not an end in itself. Law is the servant of the church."

And so when we're discussing what might seem like a pedantic point of canonical minutiae tomorrow, remember that what we're ultimately doing is helping our diocesan church better fulfil its mission and witness to Jesus Christ.

A third important piece of work emerged organically from our last Synod. Valuable critical feedback was received after a presentation at Synod concerning an earlier update to our diocesan sexual misconduct policy. This led to the Diocesan Executive Council establishing a seven-person Safe Church Working Group in 2020.

They were assisted by Mary Wells, a social worker and the Anglican Church of Canada's representative to the Anglican Communion's Safe Church Commission. Together they undertook a more extensive revision of our diocesan sexual misconduct policy, *Creating a Safe Church*, which was approved by the DEC in 2023. Such policies are always a work in progress, and feedback aimed at further improving the policy continues to be received, always with the goal of protecting vulnerable people in our midst.

I am deeply grateful to the members of both of these working groups, the majority of whom are lay volunteers, for their commitment and the seriousness with which they conducted this work on our behalf.

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A number of transitions have marked our diocesan life since we last gathered as Synod. I won't name them all, but will highlight a few.

One involves the building formerly known as Bishopthorpe, which since the 1970s served as the bishop's residence. I started living in a house of my own a couple of years ago, and earlier this year Bishopthorpe was rebranded Church House, and is now home to the Synod Office—a change in vocation that should result in financial savings for the diocese, since the building is owned by the Church Society.

Another transition concerns our venerable diocesan publication, the *Gazette*. After a publishing hiatus following the departure of editor Matthew Townsend, the *Gazette* has resumed publication, with a thematic issue each quarter in the format of a magazine. It remains a primary means of communication for our diocese.

A number of significant members of our diocesan family have retired or in some other way changed roles, and merit mention.

Ruth Sheeran and Anne Chapman have each served as rural deans and members of the Diocesan Executive Council, for their respective deaneries of Saint Francis and Quebec, for many, many years. For those of us who have been around a while, it's difficult to imagine a diocesan Synod without either Ruth or Anne. Each in their own way remain involved with the life and work of our church in their communities, but to recognize their longstanding involvement and commitment to our diocesan church, it is my distinct pleasure to name them each as rural deans emeriti.

Malcolm McLeod will also be retiring after a decade as our chancellor, a role in which he's provided sound legal counsel to our diocesan church on a wide variety of matters. I rarely dealt with lawyers before becoming a bishop, so wasn't quite sure what to expect. Malcolm has proven a sound, wise, and kind counsellor, with a genuine heart for the church. Though stepping back as chancellor, Malcolm has kindly offered to continue to be available to offer us legal counsel from time to time. In recognition of this kindness, and his faithful service, I am pleased to name him as our chancellor emeritus.

Stepping into the role of chancellor is Jacob Stone, a member of the parish of Quebec who has been serving alongside Malcolm as our vice-chancellor. (Jacob will be joining us tomorrow.)

There have also been transitions on the finance and administration side of diocesan life. Our registrar, Sean Otto, has been a welcome addition to the team at Church House, serving in the multifaceted role of operations coordinator.

This past summer, after a dozen years as our diocesan director general, Marie-Sol Gaudreau chose to move on to new challenges. (She'll be joining us at the closing banquet on Saturday.) Marie-Sol's departure allowed us to re-evaluate the position she held in the office before proceeding with a new hire, resulting in the newly defined role of diocesan comptroller. Eloah Roberge has been in that role since August, and has been very busy finding ways to bring added clarity, efficiency, and best practices to our diocesan finance and administration.

Michael Boden also stepped back as our diocesan treasurer this summer, a position he held since 2007. He had been expressing for a few years now his desire to progressively step back from his duties with the diocese, so that he can focus on his demanding full-time work overseeing the foundations that support Quebec City's English-speaking community. This is a process that began with Mike retiring as treasurer of the Church Society in 2021. He has nevertheless generously offered to continue to be available as a resource for us going forward.

Following Mike's departure I appointed Sylvain Laperrière as our interim treasurer. Sylvain has been an active member of our church for many years, serving as a lay reader and as a warden at St. John the Evangelist in Portneuf. A professional accountant, Sylvain is currently the financial manager of an established business in the Quebec City region. He has already been working closely with our new diocesan comptroller, Eloah, in managing and overseeing the diocese's finances. I'm grateful that Sylvain has allowed his name to go forward to serve in the role of treasurer on a more permanent basis.

Stephen Kohner has also allowed his name to go forward for another mandate as the secretary of Synod. As we'll be reminded over the next few days, Stephen faithfully wears a number of hats in our diocese. As secretary of Synod, he is instrumental in making this gathering happen, often in behind-the-scenes ways.

Another unheralded faithful servant of our diocesan church is Archdeacon Edward Simonton. It's the nature of the job of a vicar general to work quietly yet vigilantly in the background, which Edward does while also helping oversee and minister to a multi-parish regional ministry—a balancing act that no other diocese in the Canadian church asks of its executive officer, and one I'm not sure many others could manage. I am deeply grateful for the support he offers me as your bishop, and that he offers to our diocesan church.

Like our constitution and canons, the diocesan staff, office, structures, and officers are not ends unto themselves. We exist to assist and serve our diocesan church—the congregations and parishes and people of the Diocese of Quebec—in fulfilling our mission and witness to Jesus Christ in this time and place.

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What does that mission and witness look like? What does “a vibrant and sustainable Anglican Christian presence in eastern and central Quebec” resemble? A more basic question might be: what does the future hold?

My honest answer is: I don't know. What I *do* know is that all that we are doing—updating our governance, emphasizing discipleship formation, setting up new ministry structures, implementing robust financial systems, welcoming new staff and officers—we

are doing not to keep busy or to kill time or run out the clock, but because we believe *we have a future*.

A few years ago someone shared with me a letter they once received from a previous bishop of Quebec, which included the following line: “I am sure,” wrote the bishop, “that I don’t have to tell you the future of our church in the diocese looks grim, but we must work at it.”

The author of the letter was Bishop Allen Goodings and the year was 1977. God clearly wasn’t finished with the Diocese of Quebec 47 years ago, and God isn’t finished with us now. As long as we’re open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, God will continue to use this church to accomplish God’s good purposes in the world.

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In my charge to the last Synod, I began with a prayer that I then described as realistic but encouraging, honest but hopeful. It’s the prayer that concluded each of those 190 online services of Home Prayers during the pandemic. I still love the prayer because it doesn’t deny difficult truths or succumb to sterile pessimism. It’s a prayer that I think still speaks to where we are as a church in this time and place. As we together begin this sacred gathering that is Synod, I’d invite you to join me in praying this prayer:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go forward with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rt. Rev. Bruce Myers OGS