

Response to the Diocesan Profile by The Reverend Chad D. McCharles OSBCn

For those acquainted with Manitoba, our diocese might seem like endless miles of dirt roads to nowhere, broken down highways, characterless fields and forests, swamps and sloughs, and small communities that have little to offer. Similarly, our parishes could be seen merely as dusty vestiges of once thriving places, now on the verge of closing with shrinking and aging congregations. With this being the dominant trajectory in recent years, my fear is that within the diocese, we who call it home feel the same way about our communities and churches. Granted, who could blame us given the realities we have faced: deconsecration, hesitant amalgamations, necessary ecumenical shared arrangements, and various other symptoms of decline with which we are all too familiar. Call me painfully optimistic, but optimism is in my nature, demonstrated by my personal motto that has never steered me wrong – “The cross of Christ is my light.” The cross is a symbol of dark death that shines forth the most radiant light of the resurrection, pointing the way to the most hope filled truth of the Gospel...eternal salvation. With this light of love shining in the darkness, hopeful optimism is the only faithful response.

When we engage with the Gospel through this Christological lens, hope springs eternal, which is especially true in the midst of closing churches and re-shaping our common life, because we are a resurrection people! In this beautiful place we call home, I see churches comprised of people living out the legacy of holiness that has been handed to them by the generations that have gone before. Generations of ancestors who accomplished unimaginable feats with very little. By Christ, this can not merely be perilous optimism fueled by false hope. For if it was, Lazarus would have remained dead in the presence of Christ! If our ancestors could accomplish what they did with the little they had, by God we can do that much and more, because we too are in the presence of Christ.

We must stop measuring our worth by the numbers in our pews. This view is simply unjust because of how very committed everyone in this diocese is to ministry, regardless of how many gather for worship in our churches. We must push back on this demographic pessimism! The Diocese of Brandon is ahead of the curve, and as such, we can not afford to think of ourselves as the “small fry” on the Canadian Church scene. In fact, because we have been living this reality for decades, we are on the cutting edge of what the Church is now realizing it needs to lean into, and this is familiar territory for us! The reality that has shaped our common life for generations, where friend and neighbour are elbow to elbow in the sink, literally and figuratively, pitching in to do what needs doing, regardless of race, creed, or denomination. Working together for the betterment and support of others, living out in a very real way the mission and ministry of Christ, and building up God’s Kingdom. Striving to make their community better in so many ways that if every one of our Anglican parishioners in all their respective communities suddenly stopped this work, every community from North to South would be impoverished. In a day and age when many folks in small communities are no longer surrounded by all their family members because they have had to move away for school and work, the Church fills this gap in a very real way through the fellowship that takes place in sharing mission. We are the Church, living stones built upon one another, witnessing to the Gospel with or without bricks and mortar. We are a part of the fabric of our communities. Full stop. You would be missed if the Church community suddenly disappeared. This is a source of great hope for me as I question what the future looks like in the diocese, because I know nothing will change our commitment to community. This is who we are!

We see this lived out in radical and deeply rooted ways both in the South and the North. Our Indigenous communities live out the Gospel by carrying their rich culture and caring for their communities during times of celebration, tragedy, and death alike. I have always been inspired by how authentically my Indigenous sisters and brothers live out the Gospel, epitomizing this sense of hope in the face of darkness, but never more so than when I was serving in the diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. While there, I experienced what diocesan life is like without an Indigenous presence. Due to the longer history

of settlement in Eastern Canada, there has been a more extensive eradication of Indigenous culture in the Maritimes. Without the laughter and amazing sense of humour, regard for the wisdom of elders and matriarchs, genuine relationships, deep spirituality, the connection to the sacred land Creator has gifted us and the Indigenous approach to caring for it, the Church is likewise impoverished. Having to come face to face with that absence opened my eyes to how important the Indigenous approach to living out the Gospel is, not only for our diocese, but the Church as a whole, and how very blessed we are to be journeying together here in the diocese of Brandon. In many ways, our relationships and commitment to reconciliation is an example needed far beyond our borders. Walking along side you as your bishop would be an immense honour, but selfishly, a great excuse to finally spend more time up North and absorb the ways that your humble, genuine hearts shape and inform ministry.

My attraction to Indigenous spirituality and culture is a natural one, as humour and humility have always been chief cornerstones of my life and ministry. So much so that my daily prayer, fervently offered to God upon my knees each night, is to be kept from being led astray by my own selfish desires and ambitions. This informs every aspect of my ministry as a priest and would inherently shape my ministry as a bishop. This guidepost of humility manifests in my commitment to raising up leaders in the Church to serve at all levels, because I recognize that I can not minister on my own. Not one of us can or should, because this is not how Jesus did it. I believe deeply that as a leader in the Church I am called to equip Christ's Saints for ministry by helping them to realize, hone, and engage with their spiritual gifts. When we engage the Gospel in such a way that it draws our lives and the lives of those around us closer to the love and light of Christ, the Church steps closer to God's desire for us. But we can only do this together. This is why I know it is critical for the Church to carry out God's work as a community. The adage "*it takes a community to raise a child*" is profoundly true, and applicable to raising up one another in God's love, as we are all beloved children of God. It takes a community to build bridges over troubled waters, and it is only through humility that true reconciliation and right relationships will prevail in our land. This is the crucible in which the leadership of the Church of tomorrow must be tested and formed.

Speaking of testing, let me test your patience by talking MONEY! This is a brash statement considering I was just going on about humility. One thing I have learned from my time serving as incumbent of a United and Anglican congregation is that not all Christians consider money to be such a taboo topic. Stewardship is one of the key fundamentals that we must embrace in our life in Christ, if for no other reason than to acknowledge how immensely we have been blessed by God. Jesus talked about money so much that eleven out of his forty parables were about money. I recognize how awkward this topic is, but in truth, it is the first step in cultivating cultures of gratitude and generosity in our parishes. This is not to suggest that our parishioners are not already giving generously. I know all too well that this diocesan ship of ours would have sunk decades ago without the radical generosity with which we share our time and treasures. Therein lies part of our challenge, as soon as we mention money or tithing, we all get defensive because we know we are already giving plenty and wonder how much more we could give. A culture of generosity in a parish releases us from such insecurities into a reality of love in which we are intended to live. Out of true gratitude and generosity springs new life and opportunities for growth. It really is that simple, because people who are grateful and recognize the gifts they have, and who trust in God fully, do not have to worry about hoarding their treasure. In truth, a stewardship conversation is about discipleship, and disciples of Jesus share all they have for the betterment of those around them. This is the Christian vision we should be talking about when we build our narrative budgets as a matrix for our diocesan and parish life. This is the key that unlocks our financial futures as the diocese. We simply must be willing to re-learn how to talk about money.

Learning is a lifelong endeavour I hold dear, as I see education as a key component to the make up of a healthy organization. This was exemplified in our diocese through Bishop William's legacy of learning which he encouraged and made possible through the Licentiate program. In my view, education is the kindling of a flame and not just the filling of a vessel, and true education is marked by one's ability to learn how to change. Therefore, changing our view of what constitutes an education designed to equip us for mission and ministry is a crucial step in embracing the new realities that face the Church, and a necessary one to building on the licentiate successes here at home. Mission is one hallmark of Christian purpose that is a harvest in need of labourers, especially amongst Anglicans. Realizing the vast difference between mission and outreach is a learning curve needed to embrace the fruits that grow from the fertile soil of true missional engagement. Outreach might be sharing a homemade loaf of bread with a neighbour. Mission is sharing that loaf of bread with the attached quotation "*It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world*" -John 6: 32. Exploring and learning these nuances opens a world of possibilities for evangelism and discipleship, all of which must be done with an eye to sharing Jesus, not filling pews. The latter will come if we attend to sharing Jesus first and foremost.

Sometimes, however, our mission field isn't as unfamiliar as all that. An essential missional tenet of my ministry is visitation. Once upon a time I was invited by an 80-year-old parishioner for tea, not an uncommon occurrence in ministry. He had grown up in rectories as the son of an Anglican priest, which gave him firsthand experience of his father's priestly ministry in an era when the Church was thriving. When he asked what my plans were for visitation in the parish (which I had arrived in just two days previous), I responded with some pat answers about care homes and hospitals, and putting a list at the back of the church for people to sign up if they wanted a visit- admittedly, a practice with which I had little success. He bluntly explained that if I wanted my parish to grow, I must visit people in their homes. Active Anglicans, inactive Anglicans, disgruntled Anglicans (they should be first, he said), non-Anglicans, atheists, and anyone in my parish who would let me in their door. He further explained that this was a model of ministry that has been sorely neglected throughout the Church, and the only real way I was going to build the necessary bridges of relationship that grows disciples and in turn, a parish. As it turned out, he was entirely correct, and once I got over my fear of making people feel awkward by visiting them, I discovered that this missional tactic was amazingly effective. Sadly, many folks were sharing that I was the first priest in more than 30 years who had visited their home. Is it any wonder people stop coming to Church when they feel disconnected and forgotten! Due to the elderly man's prescribed visitation initiative, regular Sunday attendance in that parish grew by over 200% within 12-18 months! Missional examples such as this are ways to reach into the beautiful toolbox we as Anglicans carry with us from our history and lived experience, utilizing the time honoured treasures at hand, whilst embracing the future with open arms and hearts. I would be remis if I did not mention the example of our very own Anglican Memorial Camp and the way it has been living out our Christian mission in an exemplary way. By shifting its focus to exactly where the most need is, and as a result, shifting away from concern over sparsely populated camps, the result has been an overflowing bounty of young people desperate to attend each summer! THIS IS MISSION IN ACTION! This is how mission changes lives.

The Diocese of Brandon has an exciting and bright future ahead because the light of Christ's cross shines as brightly as ever, especially into the darkness of uncertainty. A light that has not been, nor ever will be diminished by rural depopulation or increased secularization. If anything, such shadows only make that light of love shine brighter by contrast! A light I see glowing in the hearts around our tables. We are not impoverished. We are not without hope. We are a people of land and table with abundance to share with a world craving God's sustenance, now more than ever. Step into a future focussed on this truth, and the eternal truth that in serving God we are set free from fear and despair to live into bounteous hope!

Yours in Christ,

Chad†