

Faith in the Public Square 2017



A Talk Given by Bishop Geoff Peddle

Parish of St. Mary the Virgin, St. John's, Newfoundland, June 3, 2017

Good morning. I want to welcome everyone who is joining us for **Faith in the Public Square 2017**. My name is Geoff Peddle, and I am the Bishop for the Anglican Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador. Every second year our Diocese convenes what is called a Synod (S-Y-N-O-D), from a Greek word meaning “assembly” or “meeting” when we come together to take counsel for our Church and to make decisions. Our last such Synod was in 2016.

At our Diocesan Synod in April of 2016, called, **The Church Has Left the Building**, we explored ways in which we as Anglicans can move beyond “the visible church” of buildings and congregations and put our faith to work in the world around us. At that Synod, I called upon our diocese to take leadership in convening an ecumenical conference of other faith communities to discuss our place in the wider social fabric and explore what we share in common. Today’s gathering is the outcome of my request. We have called today, **Faith in the Public Square 2017**, borrowing the imagery of a town centre or public square that is a meeting space for all.

Although our Anglican family is large in Newfoundland and Labrador, with three dioceses, over 50,000 identifiable and actively contributing members, and about an equal number who participate in informal and occasional ways, today we draw the circle of our family and friends even larger. In addition to delegates from across the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador, invitations have been sent to the faith groups represented by the Religious Social Action Coalition of Newfoundland and Labrador, the St. John's and Area Council of Churches, and others. I welcome denominational leaders from almost every Christian church in our province today, and I welcome colleagues from many other faith communities. And because we are discussing that “Public Square” where we encounter others who may not be motivated by religious faith but who share our commitment to human dignity and social justice, we include representatives from Government, Business, and many community-minded groups. The tent we pitch today is a very big one and I want everyone here to feel respected and welcomed and honored. If there is to be found a common denominator among those present let it be in the quality of our commitment to one another. **Faith in the Public Square 2017** is a gift to all of you from the Anglican Church in Newfoundland and Labrador.

This year’s conference, building on last year’s Synod, is intended to be a conversation among people of faith about what it means to work together in the Public Square. Our esteemed speakers, **The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson**, 26th Governor General of Canada, and **Sister Elizabeth Davis**, member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland and Labrador and former President and Chief Executive

Officer of the Health Corporation of St. John's, will share with us their thoughts on our theme. Later this afternoon, a panel composed of Madame Clarkson and Dr. Davis, plus Ms Nancy Bennett of the Jewish Community Havura, Dr. Mohammed Nazir of the Muslim Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, and Canon David Burrows, Canon for Society and Justice in the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador will respond to your questions.

Your Convening Circular contains much information about today. Greetings are included from our Lieutenant Governor, The Honourable Frank F. Fagan, and also our Premier, The Honourable Dwight Ball. Many people have contributed to this gathering and I want to thank the Parish of St. Mary the Virgin for hosting us. I thank the organizing committee who worked with me over the last year: Archdeacon Samuel Rose, Archdeacon Charlene Taylor, Canon David Burrows, and the Reverend Christopher Fowler. I also acknowledge the generous assistance of our Member of Parliament for St. John's South – Mount Pearl, the Honourable Seamus O'Regan. We are grateful to Chef Gregory Boronski for lunch at noon. After lunch, there will be a very short video entitled "Opening Doors" shared with the delegates from across the Anglican Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador, revealing for the first time a new logo and perhaps even a new name for our diocese.

A challenge before us today is to define what we mean when we speak of religion and faith because the terms mean different things to different people. It is difficult to find a normative definition of religion. But at great risk I will cautiously suggest to you that religious faith for most people is understood as an encounter with the Holy, however that Holy is defined. That "sacred reality" can be understood as a personal God, an impersonal God, or an alternate reality. For most people, religious life is also highly social with many traditions and practices and sacred texts. This social component of religious life is what we will discuss today, however, religion always has an intimate and deeply personal component. And here we must tread softly and carefully. Conversations about religion in Canada are also conversations about diversity and inclusion in Canadian society.

As we celebrate **Canada 150** we do well to reflect upon the role that religion has played in Canada. Faith communities, along with voluntary associations and charities, continue to fulfill a vital role, occupying that space we call "Civil Society" located between government and the marketplace. There, faith communities work together for the common good and contribute in lasting ways, shouldering many social responsibilities like affordable housing and poverty elimination. The contribution of faith communities is impressive in terms of their engagement and civic investment. The American sociologist, Robert Putnam (*American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*), discusses the "supercharged" nature of volunteerism among people of faith. I can point to studies in the United Kingdom and the United States showing that church members are motivated *beyond the ordinary* by their faith to contribute millions of volunteer hours to society every year. The **Halo Canada Project**, a research project aimed at measuring the economic impact of religious communities, released a report this year stating that just 25 congregations in Toronto from various faith traditions have a "Halo Effect" of \$73 million per year in terms of their programs and services (*Anglican Journal*, May 2017).

People of faith, whatever their tradition, contribute immensely to the social fabric of Newfoundland and Labrador. We are citizens, taxpayers, workers and volunteers. It is my hope that the wider social world – Business, Government, Media – may see the value of an enhanced conversation with all people of faith in our

province. The monetary value of volunteer hours given by members of faith communities to better this province is immense.

A 2017 analysis of religious values in Canada called **Faith in Canada 150**, based upon polling by the Angus Reid Institute in collaboration with the think tank Cardus, indicates that religious belief continues to influence the social and political views of Canadians, motivating many into action. A *National Post* article evaluating this poll (Ray Pennings: “Faith plays a big role in how Canadians see the world,” May 17, 2017) ends with these words: “Religious faith has a role to play in Canada’s public life. It’s key to personal identity for most of us and helps us to make sense of the world. It doesn’t push us to the extremes. It impels us to care for others. That’s worth thinking about when we consider the next 150 years of Canadian society.” Indeed, conversations around citizenship and diversity happen naturally within and among places of worship, and vital skills to be citizens of Canada are instilled in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples.

I quote from my 2014 Pastoral Letter to the Church on Community:

I believe that some of the most important players in any social plan for Newfoundland and Labrador going forward are religious groups and communities. These groups not only add value to the discussion but also bring with them ready-made networks of volunteers and infrastructure that can enable governments to better reach communities and serve their people. One of the greatest values of religious communities today lies in their ability to speak effectively on behalf of those who are often marginalized by society and whose influence over the levers of power is weak. It is incumbent upon those holding public office to protect and enhance local communities, religious and otherwise, in order to preserve a vital human dimension to our common life here. The choice should not be between religion or no religion in the public sector but instead should center on how government partners with all of its citizens – both secular and religious – for the common good.

Those of us who live in North America or who come from places like Western Europe are familiar with the words secularization and secularism even if we do not regularly use them. Secularization is a historical process whereby religious influence in society is diminished over time and often removed from places like schools, universities, and hospitals. Secularism is the principle that mandates the separation of religious institutions from public and government institutions. Archbishop Rowan Williams of the UK (*Faith in the Public Square*) differentiates between two kinds of secularism: programmatic and procedural:

Programmatic secularism creates an environment whereby expressions of private religious conviction are shunned in the public space and citizens are expected to affirm a public loyalty to the state. In some places, it seeks to suppress religious symbols and dress so that citizens are not to be identifiably religious in the public space. Programmatic secularism sometimes presents a problem for religious people because it works on the assumption that loyalty to the state must be above one’s loyalty to their faith.

Procedural secularism, on the other hand, is the type of secularism favored in Canada, *for the most part*, and works on the assumption that more than one kind of public loyalty is possible. The state protects and affirms a variety of religious communities without giving any advantage in public life to one over another. Procedural secularism recognizes that individuals are free to choose their private religious path while also being good citizens. A person is free to love both their faith and their country in the public square.

There continue to be debates in some places over things like prayer in public schools, or nativity displays at Christmas, or the wearing of religious dress in public. My problem with these debates is that they assume the right path must be exclusive – either one or the other, religion or no religion. Why can't the right path include both? Someone recently asked me about religion in our schools and communities as Newfoundland and Labrador becomes increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious. I said I believe we should respect and celebrate all that is holy for each other. Religious faith and tradition, for me, is a deep well that gives meaning to life in so many ways. We are all richer ... together.

My hope for today is that all of us who are people of faith, however that faith is lived, however that faith is celebrated, may discover new things about one another and may come to value our common humanity in ever deeper ways. And while all of us here today from our varied traditions may not believe the same things about the Holy, there are some things upon which we should all agree about each other. In conversations around social justice, human rights, personal dignity, and religious freedom all of our traditions have something important to say. Some of us are fond of quoting the “Golden Rule” – *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* – and many sacred texts echo this ideal in different ways. A few examples follow:

- From Judaism (Hillel, Talmud, Shabbat 31a) we read “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary.”
- From Islam (The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith) the Prophet Mohammed teaches, “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.”
- The Baha’i Faith (Baha’u’llah, Gleanings) tells us “Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.”
- In Hinduism (Mahabharata 5:1517) we learn “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.”
- Buddhism (The Buddha, Udana-Varga 5:18) teaches “Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”
- Sikhism (Guru Granth Sahib p.1299) offers us “I am a stranger to no one and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all.”
- And in Christianity (Matthew 7:12) Jesus tells us “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

And so today we will explore what it means to live our faith in the public square. Both Madame Clarkson and Sister Elizabeth will share with us their thoughts around religious faith in Canada past, present and future and also share something of their own faith journeys.

We will now take a ten-minute break and reconvene at 11 a.m. to hear Sister Elizabeth Davis.