

In the Dark the Eye Begins to See: A reflection on the Statistics report for Council of General Synod



Image: "In the Dark the Eye Begins to See" Cornelia van Voorst

At the most recent Council of General Synod Neil Elliot presented a report that resulted from an analysis of accumulated data from across the Anglican Church of Canada. Elliot writes in the introduction "A simple projection from our data would indicate that there will be no members, attenders or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately 2040." This projection was achieved through looking at 5 different sets of data and is firm in its prediction. For example Elliot looks at the proportion of the Canadian population who are Anglican members: Membership 1961 = 1,358,459 members / 18 million Canadians = 7% of Canadians; 2001 = 641,845 members / 31 million Canadians = 2% of Canadians; 2017 = 357,123 members / 35 million Canadians = 1% of Canadians. Along with other statistics, Elliot's paper is a sobering and honest report that requires attention and action.

This report is not just a ‘wake-up call’ or some kind of tool to motivate people to change some behaviors. It is a realistic look at the state of our communion. He writes that “If there is hope in these numbers, it is the hope that if we have the will to do it, then some data gathering and analysis in the next few years will enable us to shape the future and not react to it. Through paying attention to these statistics, we may discern God’s call to our beloved church in these challenging times.”

Elliot highlights the rate of decline will likely increase over the next 20 years, and that none of the attempts of the last fifty years to “address this decline” have been effective, so it is not likely that any current attempts we devise will either. Elliot does not call for dramatic attempts to address the shrinking. He does call us to an awareness that the future *will* look different than the past, that what sustained us in the past will not sustain us into the future, and we must act *now* to discern and begin embracing the realities we face. As Elliot writes in his conclusion: “The data above suggests that National Church has a limited window of opportunity to demonstrate proactive leadership”. The limited window is upon us and we must resist the temptation to delay in acting.

While this report is a big picture look at the whole Anglican Church in Canada it reflects what is happening locally in our diocese. Gail Gauthier produced a report looking at some of the local data within our diocese. In it she notices many of the same trends and potential difficulties arising from the current trajectory. These reports are about us, and we aren’t going to be able to avoid what is happening. *The Church of God, however, is not limited to the model and mode of existence we have been practicing.*

As the Elliot report indicates this is not drastically new information, and the numeric decline has been taking place over many years. Douglas John Hall one of Canada’s foremost theologians has been thinking and writing about these trends for a number of years. In the mainline churches in Canada the separation from the status and privilege of the past may indeed be essential to remembering our faithful vision for the future. He says “from the edges of imperial societies a [community of disciples] possessing awareness of its changed relation to power can exercise a prophetic vigilance for God’s beloved world that, as part of the world’s power-elite, it never did, and never could achieve.” What is possible moving forward, is not a regaining of what has been ‘lost’ but the rediscovery of the voice of God in our midst.

In the remainder of these reflections I want to highlight a few things that I think will be important for us to consider in seizing the window we have. First by noticing a few things, secondly by reflecting a bit on the secular context we find ourselves in, and finally, by connecting these reflections to Transforming Futures the ongoing initiative we are committed to.

Practicing Noticing

As we observe Advent, we have been reminded to wake up and to wait and one attribute of being awake is to **notice**. One consequence of Neil Elliot’s report may indeed be to awaken

folks to the reality that the diminishing numbers and energy in their parish is not simply a local and anecdotal reality, but is part of a larger trend that needs attention. Noticing, however involves qualitative things as well as quantitative. I think we need to notice how we have been formed by the ways of being and operating in the world that have given us a mind that is different than the kind of kenotic mind we have been called to have. (Phil 2:5-11)

1) Competition – One way we have been distracted and divided is the constant tendency to compare and compete with each other, and with other groups and initiatives. What other denominations are doing, or what congregations in other parts of the world are up to. What type of ministries or events are happening in our neighbouring parishes, or how what we are doing measures up to what is going on elsewhere. Not always is this framed as competition. It is perhaps, at its best, a sharing of the good and encouraging things that are happening. But because of our worldly formation (market capitalism especially) it is encountered as discouraging for those who do not find the same kind of thing happening in their parishes. Instead of being local manifestations of one church, we have become more like a series of related but independent churches that compare and contrast with one another, and increasingly “compete” for the same folks to attend events and become members of the community.

As I have been traveling around our parishes, one of the common refrains I hear, is that “no one else is like we are.” “We are facing a set of unique challenges that are not understood anywhere else.” I find this interesting, not because I don’t think they are telling the truth, there are unique contextual factors that do manifest in unique challenges. The interest is the underlying comparative element within and underneath these comments. We compare without ceasing, instead of being confident in our bonds of affection and unity in Christ.

2) Slow change—“change happens slow” There is wisdom in this sentiment in many circumstances. Especially in the church where time does move slower within the cyclical time of church seasons and expectation of the age to come.

Dr. Martin Luther King reflected upon this logic and tendency for people to want to slow things down. He argued that we need to realize that repentance is required not only on behalf of the “bad people” who do bad things, but for the good people who watch and give time as an answer to the problems we see. He said: “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of [people] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”¹ God desires justice, and that can’t come fast enough.

Waiting and slow movement works in favour of the privileged who are not facing the inequality and injustice that shadows and limits the lives of many people. From the perspective of the

¹ King, Martin Luther. *Letter from Birmingham Jail/ I Have a Dream*. Logan, 1990.

marginalized, slow change is the affirmation of injustice. When we have the urge to slow things down, or hear it being held up as wisdom, it must be analyzed and asked who does this benefit? Is this to be sure we make the step toward justice with intention or is it to delay taking any step at all.

As we only have a short window with which to work, we must not allow the slowing impulses to keep us from making the hard and necessary decisions to ensure the faithful futures of those who come after us.

3) Incentives – A structural consideration that should be highlighted are the types of things that are currently being incentivized in our common life. What encouragement or affirmations are available for a group or parish to try and do things other than how they have been done in the past? Or, stated differently, what kind of behaviours and decisions are being rewarded by our common life and law together? What is being socially and or canonically (or in some cases) monetarily affirmed? And what is being discouraged.

If we are wanting to free up the space in the lives of our people to live into the new possibilities that are emerging for faithful expressions of Anglicanism on these islands and inlets we need to understand and then begin to shift the implicit and explicit rewards and incentives in our diocese. We need to ensure our polity reflects our convictions and shifts along with us as we journey.

These three factors are barriers to our free and faithful response to the realities presented by Dr. Elliot's report.

The Secular

One thing for certain is that our society is increasingly “secular” and as we think about ourselves and how we need to respond as communities of faith, we need to be dedicating efforts and energy to understanding our secular context.

We live in a secular age. Charles Taylor wrote a near 800 page tome exploring the question of how “the west” went from virtually everyone believing in God to only a portion who believe in God and even they would admit that it is an option among others, all of this happening within approximately 500 years. Throughout the book Taylor warns against the subtraction narratives that would reduce the complex and layered reasons for how this happened, so be wary of any easy answers or descriptions for how this came to be.

This kind of secularity is one of three that is put forward by Taylor as to what is meant when the term secular is being used.² I will try and summarize: 1) secularization as in the public sphere – this is the move of a society to empty reference to God in civil society and within public institutions. This is a step away from state-sanctioned religion, and a step toward the awareness and inclusion of people with different faith traditions or those with no formal “faith”

² Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*, 2007.

in the religious sense. 2) Decline in participation in religion and belief in God (The Elliot report speaks mainly of this type of trend). 3) Change in the conditions of belief. In this third sense Taylor is using the term to describe a shifting of the social fabric so that it problematizes belief so that it may indeed be harder to believe than not to. This is what Taylor spends most of the book thinking about and trying to understand the shift in social imagination that has led to this kind of secular world.

Taylor does some great historical and social analysis in describing many factors that have caused the secular to be as established as it is in the west. Interestingly, when the numbers were at their peak in the Anglican Church of Canada (in the early 1960s) was when the early indicators of a numeric decline were starting to emerge in more noticeable ways. Many church leaders and theologians were noticing these early indicators and began to write and engage in what a faithful response would be. Within the Anglican context John Robinson Bishop of Woolwich wrote the controversial and wildly popular *Honest to God*.³ Robinson was public wrestling with his role as bishop as “guardian and defender” of doctrine and noticing that the context was shifting. He predicts (quite rightly I think) that “we stand on the brink of a period in which it is going to become increasingly difficult to know what the true defense of Christian truth requires.”⁴ Robinson was noticing some of the early signs of the challenges we still face. While there were strong and mixed responses to the potential solutions and amendments Robinson proposed, it seems to me that the underlying questions that prompted his work, have not been sufficiently attended to. Near the end of the book Robinson is reflecting on the role of the church in light of his inquiry. He observes “But that Christianity should be equated in the public mind, inside as well as outside the Church, with ‘organized religion’ merely shows how far we have departed from the New Testament. For the last thing the Church exists to be is an organization for the religious. Its charter is to be the servant of the world.”⁵ Robinson is calling for a serious engagement with what we have become. Unfortunately, as is often the case, folks got distracted with the debate rather than the truth within the premise of the book, which is to state it bluntly, ‘something isn’t working, and we should try and do something about that.’

Another writer from that time whose voice might prove important to hear again is Ronald Gregor Smith. Smith, who was professor of theology at University of Glasgow, wrote *Secular Christianity* to engage with the same early indicators Robinson was noticing. Smith however is quite optimistic about what these changes may lead to. He writes in the preface that “we stand today at the threshold of what may be a real step forward in the understanding and practice of Christian faith.”⁶ He notes his distinctive place in the world of theology for he believes

³ John Robinson, *Honest to God*. 1963, SCM Press. I was not alive for the flurry of discussion that resulted from this publication, and my thoughts in this section are from what I have read, and in various conversations from those who could recall it.

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ *Honest to God*, 134.

⁶ Ronald Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity*, 1966, 8.

“Theology cannot consist of pronouncements, but must rather hope to provide a contribution to the dialogue about our common human predicament.”⁷ He highlights that this is a task that every age faces, but like each generation our “theological conceptions, our standards and authorities, have to be examined in the context of a journey which is necessarily different from all other journeys, for the simple reason that our time, like every other time, has its own unique problems and possibilities. And these may be summed up in the affirmation of faith that we have to do with God in history and nowhere else.”⁸

Smith engages significantly with Rudolf Bultmann and cites his claim that we (humans) “can never jump out of time, but [have] only to choose whether [our] present is determined by the past or the future.”⁹ This is a bold statement about hope. That the way things are is not how they have to be. In engaging with ‘the secular’ often responses are hostile. Smith however offers a different perspective. He proposes that “the source of secularism is to be found in Christian faith.”¹⁰ And it is precisely through this relationship, (and its continuation into our present time) that we are offered an historical hope.

Later in the book Smith argues that ‘the secular’ emerged out of the new possibilities of freedom that the authentic revelation of justification by faith allowed. The world was liberated by this faith and through this newly liberated state was free to pursue this freedom in various ways over time. Eventually there was a disconnect between the secular consequences of this freedom and its Christian origins. The aim then for people of faith today is not to constrain the freedom of people in the world, but to remember and speak that memory of the historical responsibility including our relationship to the creator. A faithful response, then is to deeply recognize and affirm that the freedom of the world was made possible only in and through Jesus of Nazareth the Christ in our midst.¹¹ Or as Smith puts it: “It is in faith in the kerygma concerning Christ, therefore, that the possibility has been established for [humanity] to go their own way in a liberated world.”¹² This does not mean, however that all is fine and well, or that forgetting the source of freedom does not have consequences. Freedom without context and responsibility has led to unmitigated greed and oppressions of people groups and creation.

What I find so compelling about Smith’s account of the secular is that it does not condemn the secular as a failure of the church, but attributes it to the good news of a liberated world. It also presents a clear task for the faithful in remembering and proclaiming our historical responsibility to the source of our freedom. In this way Smith presents a path that has been there all along, instead of responding in defensiveness and mourning, the secular can be

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 22.

⁹ Ibid, 135.

¹⁰ Ibid, 150.

¹¹ Jesus embodied the ultimate freedom by dying and in doing so experienced the deep absence of God and made that darkness a part of God’s relation to the world, thus freeing us all to experience presence and absence as features of the established freedom for people to live as they will in the liberated world we inhabit whether they know this reality or not.

¹² Ibid, 156.

embraced as a kind of large-scale amnesia. While this approach is wary of tipping us into self-confident bearers of hidden good news, it is a path worthy of exploration. Drawing on Taylor's work above we can begin to understand and sympathize with the reality that it is easier to forget than to remember, and that the hard work before us in response to the secular is to remember to: a) remember and proclaim that memory with confidence; and b) live more fully into the available freedom of being church in a secular age.

This way of understanding the secular allows us to participate in the secular world with good faith. It allows us to be the bearers of the transcendent that haunts (and spooks) the immanent frame that the world has fully adopted, without condemnation. Understanding the secular in this light allows the church to understand itself within a prophetic role calling back to the source and sustainer of creation, and to practice and embody our faith in a secular way. This approach of the secular understands that the simple story of the secular as a category necessarily in opposition to the sacred is complicated by and in many cases falsified through a deep belief in the incarnation.¹³

So what now?

The task we have before us is to respond faithfully to the realities we face: to embody the gospel in the physical and social contexts we find ourselves. Increasingly what we need is the ability to be nimble, and to adapt to the rapidly changing world. Some thinkers in the corporate sector are identifying this as the Adaptability Quotient (AQ) which is to be placed alongside IQ and EQ. One essential skill in adaptability is the ability to let go of something that used to be good/true/effective in favour of other ways of responding. Perhaps this is due to the diminishing effectiveness of responding to *x*, or perhaps it is because we are no longer responding to *x* at all, we are seeking a response to *z*. The ability to let go, to loosen the ties that unnecessarily bind, to set the captives free. For us to live into the freedom of liberation in the full knowledge of the source of that liberation.

The risk of a report like Elliot's is that communities find ways to justify not changing anything. To think that what is happening in our parishes will be a ballast through the storm, or that if they only find that "right person" for the right task, things will turn around. Humans are brilliant at justifying action or inaction in favour of self-interest, and folks are generally resistant to change (at least at first). We must be able to distinguish between those parts of our tradition that are cultural habit and those things that are sacramental (in the small 's' kind of way). We need to go deeper into our faith to find the way forward into God's future.

Some folks will call for the merger of bureaucratic and administrative bodies to increase the efficiency of operating churches. This may have some positive influence. But this strikes me as an attempt to delay or avoid the ultimate questions of *how* communities of faith are *being* in the world. There needs to be a serious attempt to create a legacy for our faithful futures within

¹³ Much more can and should be said on this.

local geographies. It is the local expressions of faithfulness within specific physical and social contexts that will show the way, not from organizational structure or strategy.

Transforming Futures

In our diocese we have begun an intentional process of discernment and discovery through Transforming Futures (TF). Each parish is being asked to go through a process of conversations that lead to transformation—for the members of the congregation and for the community they serve and then to dedicate financial resources to that transformation.

What the information from the Elliot report offers is the space to ask difficult questions. We can see it as an opportunity to speak plainly and have the hard and honest conversations that release us from what is assumed and accepted. As TF team leaders shepherd conversations with parish leaders we believe the spirit of hope and boldness overcome the spirit of fear and scarcity.

For some parishes, transformation will look like emerging new ministries or rethinking space to allow for new ministries. For others it will look like living more fully into the vision they have already accepted. For others still, it will look like releasing some of what they currently have so they can live as a community in new ways. For some it may even involve winding down current ministries and redirecting energy elsewhere. Faithfulness will look different in communities around these islands and inlets. Transforming our collective future will be done community by community across our diocese. As I heard at a parish council meeting recently though, for all of us “Transforming Futures can be about building bridges into the future.” Transformation happens from the ground up.

Elliott’s report makes clear that attendance numbers will continue to drop and the level of infrastructure (social and physical) we are trying to maintain is no longer sustainable. We need to remember that success is not the same as faithfulness and that ‘death’ is often necessary for new life to happen. Death, we know in faith, is a doorway to life. “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24). Our culture’s deep resistance to death has led to many great medical and scientific advancements and has changed many lives for the better. When this is mapped onto other domains however, (communal, organizational etc.) we in the church share this aversion to endings despite knowing, in faith, that death leads to new life.

If we are honest with one another (and we need to be in this phase of our life) no one knows what our life together will look like in 20 years. Those of us who will, God willing, be around in 2040 should be confident knowing that, in whatever form the church remains, God will still be with us and at work in the places we inhabit. This is the truth we need to remain faithful to as we journey together into what is before us.

A couple suggestions

I agree with Elliot that we are beyond the point of making any substantial changes to address the trajectory of the numbers as we move forward. This does not mean however that we are not compelled to respond in some way. We must earnestly respond in faith to the realities we face within our physical and social environments.

Diversity: The Anglican tradition is a wide tent, from evangelical to Anglo-Catholic, from contemplative to activist and combinations of all things in between. We have within our communion space to find resonant communities of worship and mission that look different from one another. The ability to be local and contextual manifestations of this unity is a great strength. We need to continue to cultivate communities that make sense of and resonate with our tradition and our context and engage in the good work of remembering for and with our world the source of our liberation. Another aspect of diversity is the work intentionally to minister with more diverse ethnocultural groups.¹⁴ As long as we constrain our imagination of what future Anglicans will look like by what the former Anglicans looked like, we limit our potential.

Decolonize: Many parts of our practice and canon are tied with the history of colonialism and the imperial missionary project of the British empire. We need to intentionally engage in a process of inward discovery and recognition to identify and separate the faithful aspects of that past, from those that were based in problematic doctrine and cultural assumptions (the doctrine of discovery would be one example). In our worship and in our ethos we need to engage beyond the british-ness of our past and embrace the context that we find ourselves within, and the stories of the beings and places who form our communities. We must actively refuse to benefit from the established settler colonial systems that diminish indigenous and minority perspectives and work to dismantle our unjust privilege. This work is ongoing, and it is vital for our continued renewal.

Lifecycle: Death is not failure, it is essential for new life, and an ongoing and essential part of all ecosystems. We know we will have to adapt and shrink to be able to be nimble and resilient enough to continue serving these islands and inlets. Some of our ministries will need to be ended in order to allow for the space and resources to allow new manifestations of our ministry. We should provide space to mourn this and to celebrate the faithful witness of these communities. This should be done with care and concern for the stories and people who have dedicated a great deal of themselves in these ministries. The Church of Christ cannot be diminished, how we respond, and practice our faith in our places will take on many forms, even if it appears diminished in the eyes of the world.

Plant: As we re-imagine what our ministry will look like into the future we need to be bold in dedicating resources and energy in planting new forms of ministry and social/spiritual

¹⁴ National Indigenous Archbishop Mark McDonald has suggested this as well.

enterprise to continue to do the work that is ours to do. We will not always see beyond the next step, but we must keep walking. New forms of ministry and witness are emerging all around the world and we should be brave in exploring what that might look like for us. There is so much hope in our stories. Let us write some new ones. There will be opportunities to further integrate our faith into our daily rhythms of living as a community. We should pursue those opportunities. There will be opportunities to form communities of renewal and watershed discipleship, we should pursue those opportunities. We should collectively put in place a process of support to establish new forms of ministry in our midst and develop options for how these can be sustained long term. We hope for what is to come as we mourn the ways we are being asked to give up what has been. What if we committed in these next 20 years to planting a new thing for every parish that decides to disestablish? Would we view a report like Elliot's differently?

Conclusion

The Elliot report reiterates the changing context of our society and the need for our institution to adapt and adjust our way of being to continue existing beyond 2040. While this is a striking statement, it is also full of hope. We know that the way things are is not the way they have to be and we have deep wells of wisdom from which to draw insight and inspiration. The Church of God will endure and we will change to respond to God's prompting within our physical and social context. Transforming Futures is perfectly timed for these insights to be included in our conversations about what we are being called to in our parishes and communities. It is an opportune time to engage in honest conversations about ministry, vitality, and how we can be nimble for the next leg of our journey. It will not be easy, but adventure rarely is. My prayer is that the prophetic witness in our midst would be given voice, and that together we will make some hard decisions and in doing so, free ourselves for the journey ahead.

In the hope and anticipation of the one to come,

Brendon Neilson

Advent 2019.