

# **“Bishop in the Church of God” – Keeping Watch and Walking Together**

*A reference sheet towards discerning the eleventh Bishop of Edmonton*

## **Bishop of Place and People**

1. The Church of God in the Diocese of Edmonton will soon be called upon to discern and elect its next bishop. This is a serious and hope-filled task.

2. Bishops never exist in the abstract. There is no such thing as an ideal bishop, but only real bishops. Bishops are not concepts, or doctrines, or structures; they are people. Bishops are also always bishops of and with other people. And bishops come from and serve for specific places and times. For these reasons, the adaptability of a bishop to their local context for the sake of the Church’s faithfulness in mission is a critical characteristic in Anglican thinking about the who and what and why and how of episcopal ministry. To put it simply, the answer to the question ‘what is a bishop?’ has always been a bit of a moving target. This is, in fact, a good thing.

3. We start by thinking in this way because this document is not seeking to be an aid in the discernment of just any bishop. Rather, we are seeking the eleventh bishop of the Diocese of Edmonton. Before the place we know today as Edmonton ever had that name, it was called Amiskwaciy Waskahikan (Beaver Hill House). For the surrounding peoples to the north, east, south, and west, this was a central spot for gathering, sharing, and partnering for millennia. It still is this in the region today. In more recent times, it has also become a place shaped by treaties – namely Treaty Six and Treaty Eight. The original vision of these treaties has not always been honoured and lived up to. Indeed, at times both state and Church have perpetrated directly or been complicit in cultural genocide and spiritual abuse rather than the kind of mutual respect and sharing to which the treaties attest. Our church continues to have much to repent of and be healed from in this regard.

4. Naming these facts at the outset of this document is integral because awareness and recognition of them is essential to any conversation about the Church and the exercise of leadership and authority in it. Previous bishops of Edmonton have brought many good gifts through their ministry in this place, and they have served Christ, the Church, and the common good well. Our tenth bishop, Jane, has helped to lead us farther along this healing path, with a clear understanding that being transformed disciples ourselves means transforming our structures and ministries in a Jesus-shaped way. The calls to truth, reconciliation, and decolonization will continue to touch every part of life on this land, and that most certainly must mean in the Church as well. It is therefore not possible to talk about bishops in the Diocese of Edmonton, today, or into the future, without reference to these contextual realities. We are not seeking to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in raising up just any bishop, but the next bishop of this place and peoples. That person must know *this* call.

## **Keeping Watch**

5. At the root of Christian thinking about leadership and service in the Church is an understanding that the primary order of ministry is that of the baptized follower of Jesus. To be a disciple of Christ is to be a member of a “royal priesthood” (1. Pet. 2:9). Any further specific ministry which someone might be called to is always secondary to this baptismal ordering and will be carried out in service of it. This is a fundamental principle for all talk of ministry today, including that of the bishop.

6. In the New Testament, we are introduced to several specific modes of ministry. These include that of people who were given the names of “deacon” (assistant) and “presbyter” (elder), as well as those who were known as evangelists, prophets, and teachers. But at this early stage what each role respectively entailed appears to have moved and overlapped to some degree. It does appear that presbyters and deacons tended to refer to resident leaders in local Christian communities, whereas evangelists, prophets, and teachers had more of a regional and traveling character to their ministries. Beyond that, however, the distinctions seem not to have been all that clear, and it would take much more time for these roles to crystallize into anything like the forms we know them in today.

7. As we can imagine, trying to connect and keep together all these various ministries was a challenging task, but one that was deeply needed. From early on, this coordinating was a duty that came to be described by a term from the Greek language which is key for our reflection: “episkope.” This word translates into English as “oversight,” or perhaps even better, “**keeping watch.**” Every local church needed a ministry like this that could keep things moving in the right direction and ensuring as best as possible that the fabric of the Church would not be torn apart at the seams.

8. To a large degree, this overseeing ministry was carried out especially by the apostles themselves in the first generation or two post-Pentecost. However, as the apostles came towards the end of their lives, they knew that this was a ministry that had to be handed down to others, and increasingly to localized leaders. It was on this basis that the senior presbyter/elder in each community increasingly came to be referred to as the presiding- or overseeing-elder (the “episkopos-presbyteros”), with the task of serving as a special personal locus of the ministry of episkope within each local church community alongside their fellow leaders in order of the ministry of the baptized. This is the first anticipation of what we know as bishops today.

9. The Church history that followed over the next centuries would see many shifts and changes in the way bishops were understood and how they operated. Some of this was shaped by the Church getting bigger and more spread out and more diverse, all of which changed the nature of the leadership required. It was also impacted by taking on features of government and decision-making that were common in the surrounding cultures. During the time of the Reformations in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, various movements looked at these different influences with some criticism and called for simplifications or alterations of what the work of episkope should look like, where it should be located, and how it should operate.

10. Setting these historical debates aside, it is still safe to say that the idea that a ministry of keeping watch is essential to the life and work of the Church has endured throughout. Regardless of whether this has been thought to be best embodied in a more dispersed way through committees and councils, or in the person of an individual bishop, or somewhere in between (where I think the Anglican tradition falls), there are also some widely held and common convictions about what such a ministry entails. These can be grouped into three main categories that are helpful to bear in mind:

### *Shepherd*

11. First, a bishop is called to be a **chief shepherd of the Church’s unity**. The imagery of the shepherd is important here. Of course, it is Jesus Christ who is the shepherd of the Church in the fullest sense. However, bishops do share aspects of this ministry in unique ways and carry the symbol of the crosier for precisely this reason. Shepherding especially implies a pastoral emphasis to their leadership, rather than a corporate executive function. This means openness to being with and

alongside others, especially in their hurt and brokenness. Sometimes the bishop must also enact discipline to protect the flock from actions or ideas or other sources of harm that refuse to be tended to in other ways. Episcopal ministry means listening, building bridges, and cultivating the ability to speak many different languages (metaphorically at least). The bishop also gives community cohesion and serves as the glue or mortar of the church. As visible signs of unity within their very person, the bishop seeks not to take sides with anyone other than Christ. For that reason, they may sometimes need to set aside their personal preferences for the sake of maintaining the fullest relationship with others as is possible. And all these descriptors are true not only in the local church, but regionally, nationally, globally, and ecumenically (i.e., with other Christian denominations) as well. The bishop belongs to their own church first, but to the whole Church at the same time.

12. The above focuses on episcopal shepherding from a pastoral perspective. Absent from the characteristics and ministries named there were administrative responsibilities such as executive management, financial logistics, human resources, and the like, which also form a part of what a present-day bishop is asked to keep watch on. A bishop is not a CEO, but, of course, they do need to have some ability in things such as strategic planning, policy development, communications, etc. This is so because an administratively healthy church will be free to respond more fully in outreach and ministry. Yet it is also important that the bishop is comfortable and secure in sharing such matters with other experts who have unique skills and experience in these areas. The bishop's most important priority in this administrative regard is not necessarily to personally carry out such necessities all by themselves, but rather to see that they happen in a Jesus-shaped way befitting the Body of Christ.

### *Custodian*

13. Second, a bishop bears a duty as a special **custodian of the consistency of the faith of Christ**. Bishops are traditionally understood as being the principal ministers of Word and Sacrament within a local Christian community, even though most people see this manifested week to week in their parish priest. This automatically places with bishops a critical duty of ensuring that the message of Jesus recorded in the Scriptures, interpreted through the Tradition of the Church, and witnessed to through Church's sacraments, liturgy, and ministry are handed on recognizably from ages to ages. Concern for education and formation is critical here.

14. However, notice that this role implies two dimensions to it. It is not just about repeating the phrases and formulas of the past. On the one hand, yes, the bishop must be good at looking backward – i.e., being well-formed in the faith of the Church to conserve and protect it from error and distortion and continue to draw on it for guidance in the present. Yet, the bishop must also be very adept at looking forward – i.e., being able to ensure that the faith of the apostles can be received in the language and forms that allow it to speak and interact with the new issues and questions and people of every time and place. Here we see what is called in the creeds the “apostolic” mark of the Church – a backward and forward kind of tension that those keeping watch of the Church must always strive to see balanced and maintained.

### *Missioner*

15. Third, a bishop is a preeminent leader in **shaping and directing the Church's co-working mission** within the Mission of God. The Church never exists as an end unto itself. It exists for God's purposes and the sake of others. God has a mission to heal and reconcile the world, and

God's mission has a Church as one important piece of that work. This means the bishop must develop, by grace, eyes and ears that allow them to identify those places which are seeking the light of Christ, as well as a sense of how to reach out to them to bring them farther along in the ways of truth and life. Such is the ministry of evangelization, in which the bishop must be forefront.

16. Such 'telling of Good News' also means taking notice of the places where the Spirit of God has already long been at work and simply coming alongside to celebrate and support in partnership. And, of course, the greatest apologetic for the faith of Christ is not flashy systems or convincing intellectual argument, but a holiness of life and example that conveys the joyful difference which a relationship with God in Christ makes.

### **Walking Together**

17. The Anglican expression of the Jesus Movement has been well sold on the ministry of bishops as profoundly coherent with the nature and mission of the Church. This conviction is deeply rooted in our self-understanding. It is important to recognize, however, that the historic Anglican position on bishops is more nuanced than this. One way of capturing that complexity is with a phrase that is sometimes used in Anglican documents which says that the churches of the Anglican Communion are at the same time "**episcopally led and synodically governed.**"

18. The word "synod" is another critical one we need to have with us when thinking about discerning and calling a bishop. It is a concept that brings together two Greek roots: "syn" which means "together," and "hodos" which refers to a journey or path of walking. This tells us that, contrary to its most common usage, meeting in synod is not so much about juridical governance and the passing of legislative resolutions. More deeply, it is about the bonds of affection that result from different parties and perspectives "**walking together**" on the journey. In other words, this principle of being a Church that is episcopally led and synodically governed invites us not only to be a church that has synods but one which is synodal in an ongoing and all-encompassing way, with the bishop constantly walking and talking with many others as we all travel together along the way.

19. Such a conviction first and foremost implies that the bishop will seek to establish a genuinely **collegial and collaborative approach** to their episcopacy alongside their diaconal and presbyteral counterparts, where aspects of the ministry of oversight are stewarded and shared in partnership with other gifted leaders in the Church. Some experimentation in this regard in other places has included utilizing more widely people in roles such as Episcopal Vicars, Canons to the Ordinary, Deans, Archdeacons, Canons, and so on. Likewise, an **empowered and active laity** within the discernment, visioning, decision making, implementation, and evaluation of the life and work of the Church is critical, and a bishop should always make this a top priority.

20. Not only does this way of thinking about bishops as bishops-in-synod give expression to a historic Anglican theological conviction, but it also potentially has some relational and practical mercy in it for the sake of the person of the bishop as well. Bishops today are called to walk an exceedingly difficult path on behalf of their churches. Their roles are incredibly demanding – spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and personally. A synodal episkope can help to share some of this burden.

## Conclusion

21. There will never be a perfect bishop. Every bishop is a redeemed sinner and a limited human being. They will have strengths and they will have weaknesses. They will do some things very well, they will make some mistakes, and they may even fall down flat from time to time. Knowing this should encourage us in this Diocese to use this interim time to prepare ourselves again to be a church that is a soft place to land. Believing that the Holy Spirit of God will also step in with grace to enable our next bishop to do more than they or we could ask or imagine on their own takes some of the pressure from our discernment as well.

22. Thanks be to God it is God who knows the name of the eleventh bishop of Edmonton, who has desired their faithfulness from within the womb, and who has been shaping them, this place, and us, since before the foundation of the world. With the eyes of faith may we recognize them soon as we come to walk together on the way, and may Christ accompany us on the next stretch of our journey.

## For Group Study and Discussion

1. Read the following passages of Scripture: John 10:11-18, John 21:15-19, 1 Peter 5:1-5, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9).

- What do these passages tell us about the nature of leadership and oversight/keeping watch in a Christian community?

2. Think about some of the various important leaders we know in the apostolic church from the pages of scripture (such as Mary the Mother of God, Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, Paul, Stephen, Martha, Lydia, Phoebe).

- What aspects of their stories and ministries display features relevant to the ministry of episkope as it was described above?

3. Read Acts 6:1-7. In these verses, we see an example of the apostles adapting something about the way ministry in the Church of Jerusalem was carried out in response to contextual realities.

- Can we learn any transferrable lessons about the when, why, and how of contextual adaptations in the Church that could apply in our day as well?
- What kinds of adaptations to the ministry of the bishop specifically, and the governance structures of the Church more generally, might be most beneficial towards partnership in God's mission in this time and place?

4. Read Acts 15:1-30. This narrative is sometimes understood as one of the first examples of the Church and its leaders walking together in synod.

- What do you see in the details that can tell us things about being a bishop in a synodal church and being a synodal church led by a bishop?
- Does this historical example suggest anything for the way a bishop might be called to lead in our diocese today?

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