

# Surprised By Grace: An Episcopal Pilgrimage

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Sometime in the first decade of the ordination of women to the Anglican presbyterate in Canada, I was asked if there would ever be women bishops. “It will happen”, I replied, “but it won’t be in my lifetime”. Needless to say, it wasn’t the only time I’ve been wrong about how the Holy Spirit leads our church.

Should I have seen what was coming? Perhaps, but in the early days of the ordination of women to the priesthood there was a hesitancy to ordain younger women. As though by ordaining older women it would be easy to clear the church of our presence should Anglicans be overtaken by sober second thoughts. The first ordinations to the Anglican priesthood in Canada occurred on St Andrew’s Day, 1976, and what followed was slow and cautious. By 1980, there were still very few female priests across the expanse of the Anglican Church of Canada and I continued hearing both shock and delight into the mid-1980s.

This slow beginning had its advantages. There was no sense of panic. If you wanted to enter into denial, it was very easy to do so. But the good work done by these early women priests was noted and appreciated. There was no looking back.

By the early 1990s, Canadian Anglicans were becoming impatient. We knew of the three female bishops in the Episcopal Church of the United States of America and of the one female diocesan bishop in New Zealand. Women had been nominated for episcopal elections in Canada but even that was rare. But when two of the four suffragan bishops in the Diocese of Toronto announced their retirement at the same time, there was a sense of antici-

pation. The Diocese of Toronto has the largest Anglican membership in the Canadian Church and an unusual structure. At that time there was one diocesan and four suffragan bishops, with each bishop having responsibility for a particular geographic area. For cautious and mild-mannered Canadians, it was the perfect structure for a test case.

The election was set for November 19th, 1993, and of the twenty-two priests nominated, three were women. I had been approached three times before to allow my name to stand. Each time after an inner struggle, I had declined. Interestingly, each of these times I subsequently felt I had done the wrong thing. Essentially it was a matter of disobedience. If the church asks you to do something, you say Yes unless there is a critical situation at hand, such as your health or in your family. This has always been my theology and I was uncomfortable acting in a contrary fashion. In hindsight I know it was fear that made me decline the three nominations for diocesan bishop. However, either way, I do not think I would have been elected. The Diocese of Toronto was a different matter however. It was home. I had grown up there although my divinity degree was from Yale. So I was both known and somewhat different. I knew being elected was a distinct possibility.

On November 19th, Michael Bedford-Jones was elected first and myself second. We were consecrated together on February 12th 1994 at St James’ Cathedral, Toronto. It was a media event at one level but deeply spiritual as well. The Rt Rev Frank Griswold, then Bishop of Chicago, preached brilliantly. The date had been set so the consecration would follow

upon the heels of the National House of Bishops' meeting. That meant that thirty-five Canadian bishops attended and participated in the laying on of hands. There was no protest, although the Chancellors and Metropolitan were prepared for one. Indeed in the end, the Church prayed, the Spirit descended, and two priests became successors to the apostles as bishops in the Church.

## **Learning**

The consecration was on a Saturday morning and on Monday I started learning what being a bishop meant in terms of ministry and mission. In those early days I was repeatedly struck by both the nervousness and generosity of our church. Being a baby bishop always involves a steep learning curve, but in my instance I realised that I wasn't the only one in learning mode. The other Toronto bishops were determined that this was going to work but they weren't prepared to reflect on their own obvious nervousness. I tried repeatedly to have them address the issue but it was really just too scary for them. The clergy were wonderfully supportive with only the occasional slip-up. I remember one priest saying he hadn't stood beside me at the altar, because he wanted everyone to see he knew that I could celebrate on my own. What was he thinking?

One exceptionally daunting question that was asked time after time was how did it feel to be representing all women and furthering their cause. My discomfort arose from the conviction that if that was the case, then what would be the implication when I made a serious blunder? Would I then be letting women everywhere down?

It was generally acknowledged that I had a much more difficult task than the men, but I quickly concluded that wasn't so. When a male

bishop enters a room or begins to speak, a series of stereotypes immediately goes into play. He is an authority figure; he represents the hierarchical church and all the various ways in which men and bishops embody power. He may be the gentlest and most compassionate person imaginable, but he is judged before he opens his mouth. Women in the episcopate don't carry as much baggage. There is almost a contradiction in the imagery and because of that, we are more openly received and heard.

## **Advantages**

There are other advantages to being a female member of the episcopate. Canada is a vast country and there is truth to the statement that we live under the tyranny of our geography. In churchland it means that every diocese is deeply influenced by its own geography and demographics. The three Newfoundland dioceses are vast and deeply Anglican. Church life flourishes. However the total human population of Newfoundland is 500,000. When I was area Bishop of the Credit Valley in the Diocese of Toronto, with forty-two parishes to care for, the human population was at least one and a half million. Nevertheless, setting off on a Sunday morning for early church services, when traffic was at the low point of the entire week, I could reach all but one of the parishes in the Area in twenty minutes. Such extraordinary diversity and ethnic plurality is lost to many Canadians who only know their own city or portion of a province. That means when Anglicans from all over Canada gather for General Synod, the voices and personalities expressing themselves are foreign to the majority of people present. Although the highest number and concentration of aboriginal people in Canada live in Metropolitan Toronto, very few Torontonians know any aboriginals. It

also means that while both French and English are used at General Synod, there are many people from native communities who have limited English and French. At the first General Synod I attended in 1992, I was surprised by the extraordinary diversity of theological opinion. At times I wondered, “Do we even belong to the same church?”

But then, as the first female bishop in the Anglican Church of Canada, I was invited to virtually every part of the country for a “come and see” event. It was absolutely exhausting yet an incredible privilege and experience. Very quickly I began to realise that one has a very limited understanding of what it is to be Canadian in Toronto. As a city of three million, it is very multicultural, but first of all it is urban. Most of Canada is not. My first rectorship was in a rural parish just north of Toronto, and from that rich period of ministry I imagined I understood rural communities. I was wrong. Much of Canada consists of small rural communities that are incredibly isolated. This simply isn’t understood by those who live in or near the urban centres.

So off I went to visit other dioceses and meet folks who lived lives very different from mine. I quickly learned to appreciate the cultural differences and the influence of non-dominant cultures in the life of a diocese. When I would return to the Diocese of Toronto and speak of what I had seen and heard, I realised my pioneer role had brought with it an unique opportunity. With the exception of the Primate of Canada, I don’t think any other bishop was invited to such a diversity of Canadian communities. I found my understanding of the church in Canada undergoing rapid change, and I gave thanks. I also appreciated the willingness of the Diocese of Toronto to share me with the broader church. It became even more mind expanding when I was appointed to the Design Group for Lambeth 1998. Three trips to the UK, and

regional meetings with representative Caribbean, North American and South American bishops again permitted me to glimpse the complexity of the Anglican Communion.

In 1997 I was elected Diocesan Bishop of the Diocese of Edmonton, the first of the dioceses I had visited after my consecration. Located in the centre of the civil province of Alberta, the see city is the provincial capital with a population of one million. Alberta is a prairie province and enjoys extraordinary riches in oil and gas resources. The western boundary of the diocese and civil province follows the Rocky Mountains. It is a part of Canada which has unsurpassed beauty, but it isn’t Toronto, the Arctic, the Maritimes or the west coast. Like everywhere else in Canada, it is what it is because of where it is. Whereas the Diocese of Toronto is ten thousand square miles, and had five bishops, the Diocese of Edmonton is fifty thousand square miles and had one bishop. Life was going to be very different. I realised that a new adventure was beginning.

At this point, let me back up and address a definitive moment in the early days of being a bishop. I knew it was going to be incredibly hard work. The weight of the hopes and expectations was staggering. It was potentially isolating. However after a few months of episcopal ministry, I had a startling realisation: I was enjoying myself and even having fun. I was shocked to the core. Could this be possible? Well, possible or not, I decided to give myself permission to enjoy myself to the full. I would do my very best to give glory to God in all things, and I would have fun. As I looked around at some other bishops, both Anglican and Roman Catholic, I noticed a certain tendency towards a martyr complex. It’s true that we all work incredibly hard but I am convinced that there is room for joy; even a need for joy in the midst of sacrificial ministry. So, when I was

translated to Edmonton and one of the clergy widows asked me what she could do for me, I replied, “Ask me occasionally if I am still having fun because, if I’m not, I fear for both myself and the diocese”. She has carried out her task faithfully and so far the answer is yes.

Looking back to the early days of the ordination of women to the priesthood in Canada I remember a similar tendency to trade war stories and commiserate. For myself, I believe that the very best support we can offer one another is to say. “Tell me about something that is going well. Tell me about your prayers of thanksgiving . . .”

## Prayer life

Long before election to the episcopate became a possibility, I decided that my prayer life would be the priority of my ministry. Like so many young deacons and priests, in the early days of ordered ministry I struggled to pray the offices faithfully. In seminary I had delighted in daily Eucharist but in the parish it quickly became difficult to attend Mass unless I was the celebrant. After eight years in parish ministry I decided to leave the parish, finish up a graduate degree thesis that was gathering dust on the shelf, and then return to Haiti to work with the Sisters of St Margaret for a few months. What I was really seeking was a sabbatical to reconsider vocational priorities. I followed my plan and it was a magnificent time of renewal and reflection.

One of my resolutions when I returned to parish ministry was that I would make prayer the first priority and allow ministry to follow the lead of prayer. It was transforming. All the petty resentments that so easily occupy a priest’s time and energy took a back seat when time before the throne of grace came first. My new parish was close to the Convent of the

Sisters of St John the Divine and I became a frequent attendee at their daily Eucharist. An hour of daily meditation, often broken up into a couple of thirty minute blocks, was also put into place. It’s extraordinary but I honestly think that is why I was elected to the episcopate. I’ve been told that there is a Spanish proverb, “They can smell prayer on you,” and perhaps they could. Sometimes I laugh and ask myself if I would ever have made those decisions if I knew it would lead to the purple. I don’t think I would have. In my naiveté I really believed that my choices constituted taking a back seat in terms of ministry. I thought I was opting out of church politics. Sometimes it is very good we don’t know where the Spirit is leading.

The Edmonton election was March 8th, 1997. I was seated in the Cathedral of All Saints’ on May 31st. The whole process of the election of bishops is very interesting. My total experience of Edmonton had been leading a three day clergy retreat two years before. In the Canadian system one is elected by the clergy and lay Synod members of the diocese. In many instances no bishop casts a vote. In other words, no one who actually knows episcopal ministry first hand votes in the election. There are usually questions one is asked to answer in writing and one provides a *curriculum vitae*. Behind the scenes the members of the electoral Synod are busy phoning around finding out about the various candidates. While those nominated find out a certain amount about the diocese considering them, one is aware that the diocese probably knows much more about oneself than one knows about the priests and people. However over the years this changes. Gradually the diocese becomes populated by priests the new bishop has ordained and/or appointed, and a large number of lay leaders, especially youth, become well known.

## Neighbourliness

In terms of population, the Anglican Church of Canada is not as strong in western Canada as in the east. There is a smaller population overall and this has its advantages. The living memory of being the western frontier makes community life very important. The winters here are very severe and you know you need your neighbour and your neighbour needs you when it is  $-40^{\circ}$  and there is car trouble or a power outage. In the churches this translates into strong communities and excellent ecumenical relations.

The Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Ukrainian Catholic and Anglican bishops of central Alberta meet every other month for lunch. Also present is the Executive Secretary of the United Church of Canada local Conference. Our topics range from clergy spirituality to local politics concerning health care and education. My presence as a female bishop is simply not an issue and since the new United Church member of the group is also female, the genders are almost balanced. Most recently the decision in Canada to change the definition of marriage to include same-gender couples has caused some lively conversation around the lunch table. We certainly are not of one opinion but it hasn't stopped us meeting and continuing in dialogue.

On the national level, Canada enjoys an Anglican-Roman Catholic bishops' dialogue that is almost of thirty years duration. We aim to have eight bishops of each denomination present, representing the breadth of Canada. The conversation is conducted in both official languages with recent topics including *The Gift of Authority* and a day in the life of a bishop. This autumn we are anticipating studying the new ARCIC document on Mary. While I have not been able to be present every time it has met,

the Anglican intention from the very beginning was to have both genders represented, simply because that is who we are as a church.

Are there still hold-outs against the ordination of women in our church? Certainly, although they are relatively few in number. My approach to this has changed somewhat over the years. While I continue to hold that a two thousand year old single-gender tradition cannot be outlawed because we have embraced the inclusion of women in all three orders of ministry, I do believe that with the passage of time individual Provinces of the Anglican Communion need to name what is the norm for their church. In Canada this has been done by saying that while the option of being against the ordination of women continues, one cannot change orders if one holds that position.

## Reception

Another concern is the question of the reception of deacons and priests who have been ordained by female bishops. At a recent Trinity College Divinity Associates Conference in Toronto, it was pointed out that a woman priest ordained by a male bishop is able to move more freely about the Anglican Communion than a male priest ordained by a female bishop. I was amused at the tone of outrage adopted by the young male cleric pointing this out. It spoke volumes about his assumption that women in any order could be questioned or compromised but it was an urgent injustice if the same thing happened to a man. In the Diocese of Edmonton there is one parish where a small number of people have issues of conscience about the ordination of women. Early on I promised I would not force a woman upon them. But in recent interviews it became apparent that the candidate they wanted appointed as rector was a priest I had ordained. Mind you,

another (male) bishop was present as the preacher at the ordination and he had joined the priests of our diocese in the laying on of hands. Much hair splitting took place thereafter because this bishop's hands had not actually made physical contact with the head of the man being ordained. Nor did his lips move during the prayer of consecration so could they really be sure that he was praying? I found all this rather trying but the outcome was that the parish decided that the priest was indeed who they wanted as their new rector. To date his ministry has been well received.

Obviously there is a line to be drawn between acknowledging a difference of theology and deciding that certain behaviours are unacceptable. Any attempt at disguising rank prejudice and sexism as "orthodox theology" is to be shunned, but because the whole discussion so clearly revolves around the person and office of the bishop, who happens to be female, it is important to consult widely before making one's response. We may have completed another chapter but it's not the conclusion of the debate.

In ECUSA, the Presiding Bishop officiates at all ordinations/consecrations to the episcopate. In the Anglican Church of Canada, the Metropolitan of the (internal) ecclesiastical province presides at episcopal ordinations. It won't be all that long before one of the four Metropolitans is a woman. This will again cause the conversation about reception to be revisited. On a larger scale, it is a parallel debate to the validity of the orders of the (male) priests ordained for this diocese. Even if one leans over backwards to accommodate those of tender conscience, the fact remains that it is not a bishop or archbishop who ordains but the Church. In the instance of the priest ordained for this diocese, two bishops and some forty or fifty priests joined in the laying on of hands. The Church prayed, the Spirit

descended and a deacon was ordained to the priesthood. In the instance of an ordination to the episcopate, in this particular ecclesiastical province (Rupert's Land), there are usually at least fifteen bishops who join in the laying on of hands at the consecration. Each has personally given consent to the election prior to the ordination service. It is one of the glories of the catholic tradition that we recognise the need for the whole church to be representatively present when anyone is ordered a priest or bishop. It is not unlike the acknowledgement that at every celebration of the Eucharist, be it in a grand cathedral or by the bedside of a dying patient, that present and praying is the whole company of heaven. In every instance, it isn't a bishop's ministry but the ministry of the Body of Christ.

## **The theology of episcopé**

At this point, I wish to depart from writing in such a personal vein. Drawing on some of the themes that have already been introduced, some aspects of the theology of episcopé will be considered.

First of all, let us return to the importance of context in the shaping of the episcopate. The Chicago Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886/1888 has in its list of the essentials of Christian unity, "The Historic Episcopate – locally adapted". Women in the episcopate is at this time a local adaptation. Judging by the collegiality of the Lambeth Conference of 1998, it need not be seen as disruptive of either Anglican harmony or ecumenical dialogue.

We know that through the patristic and medieval periods of church history, there were those who essentially equated bishops with unity. Ignatius, Cyprian, and Irenaeus all agreed that bishops were the very glue of the church and of its "esse". Others, such as Hippolytus,

Epiphanius, Chrysostom and Jerome, believed that there was only an artificial distinction between bishops and priests. Yes, bishops alone could ordain, although the distinction of orders did not prevent a bishop and a priest concelebrating the Eucharist. We understand this latter position to have been Cranmer's theology<sup>2</sup>. Indeed the Ordinal of 1661 was the first time bishops are presented as a separate order. To say the least, the idea caught on and we know that from the Caroline Divines through the Tractarian movement, the theology of the episcopate continued to be enhanced.

What does this mean in the 21st Century? Present eucharistic ecclesiology emphasises the role of the presider as the one who gathers the community. When present it is generally expected that the bishop will preside at the Eucharist. Thus the bishop's authority is expressed by calling the people of God together. Ideally, in the eucharistic setting, whatever differences there may be, there is a stronger unifying symbol present. In the presence of the Body and Blood of Christ, and in the Body of Christ, it should be possible for even vehement opponents to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, in each other.

Such an understanding underscores that the church is relational before it is hierarchical. These relationships, with God in Christ and with one another, are held together by a single common intention and the recollection that we are mutually interdependent.

The early days of the Church of England in Canada saw an almost British church, although we weren't established. But context could not be ignored for long. The Canadian bishops knew it was essential for them to meet despite the vast distances involved. This meant both diocesan and suffragan bishops come together twice a year. There was and is much work to be done, but relationships are at least as impor-

tant. When General Synod meets, every three years, the bishops are members of the Unicameral House. Aboriginal bishops (Métis and First Nations) have changed the House of Bishops at least as much as the presence of women. The Anglican Church of Canada clearly lives a post-Christendom existence and no one is more aware of that reality than the members of the House of Bishops.

The 21st Century has brought a renewed awareness of the need for our church to have a mission orientation. Sometimes in-house debates such as the ordination of women, the blessing of same gender unions and the crisis of the residential schools settlement cause the Anglican Church of Canada to forget this outward focus and we return to navel-gazing. However, God's mission is clearly towards the world more than the church, and we need to be attentive to God's concerns. In many respects the laity are leading this return to a mission focus. In the post-Christendom world, attention will be paid to worthy causes and not to the whining of over-tired institutions. Repeatedly we hear of the need for balance between maintaining the Tradition and rapid change. Perhaps what needs to be asked is, "What is making a difference? What is actually helping people live their lives in Christ more fully?"

## **God's mission**

In the midst of such shifts and changes, one wonders about the best style for episcopal leadership. It has been said that the 20th Century was the century of martyrs and we know some of them were bishops. The Ordinal acknowledges the public and prophetic role of bishops, which is distinct from maintaining order in the ranks, and much more challenging to the present order of society. To be prophetic requires a focus upon the coming reign of Christ.

Style is important as there is an inevitable tension between any hierarchical structure and our increasingly egalitarian society. Furthermore, we are told that denominational loyalty is now a thing of the past. We must ask why anyone would want to belong to an episcopal church. What have we to offer? There is much to offer but we need to learn ways of explaining the marks of the Church, **one, holy, catholic, and apostolic**, to people who have never heard those words before. It is yet another aspect of the deep need for evangelism. Ours is clearly a time for servant leadership.

Every bishop is aware of the clash of roles between being both pastor and keeper of discipline. As the leader of the diocese, the office of bishop can be lonely and even isolating. But God help the isolated shepherd who is distant and aloof while being responsible for the flock. At such times the collegiality of bishops should be helpful, but like so many other human situations, the bishop who is in trouble is most likely to withdraw from episcopal fellowship.

The bishop is responsible for much, but that doesn't mean that the bishop can, for a moment, cease to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It sounds obvious but it can all too easily be

forgotten. Only by following our Lord can the bishop offer true and faithful leadership. Furthermore, the bishop, who is entrusted with great authority, must remember that Jesus always *invites* others into discipleship. Jesus doesn't coerce. So too, in the episcopate, nurture and cultivation and not coercion, should be the style of leadership.

Returning to the idea of eucharistic ecclesiology, the bishop and people will of course play a part in shaping the liturgy for the local context, but even more importantly both bishop and community need to be shaped and nurtured by the Liturgy.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly and, dare I say, profoundly, it is in and through this ministry of hospitality that the apostolic tradition and prophetic call become one. In the holy mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ, the community recognises that while none are worthy, all are welcome. In the words of St Augustine of Hippo on the Holy Eucharist, "Behold who you are; become what you see". The bishop called to uphold the faith, unity and discipline of the Church, knows also that episcopal ministry in every instance must enlarge the world's understanding of the embrace of Christ's love.

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#### NOTES

- 1 ARCIC 2, Anglican Book Centre, London, 1999
- 2 Maurice Elliot, *Search* 28. 1. p.78, "Episcopal Orders: Insights from Cranmer"
- 3 Rowan Williams, "Authority and the Bishop in the Church" p.99 in Mark Santer (ed), *Their Lord and Ours: Approaches to Authority, Community and the Unity of the Church*, (London: SPCK, 1982).

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