

## **Visioning Committee Report (Annual Congregational Meeting, March 2017)**

Church membership across denominations has been in decline ever since the late 1960's. The erosion at first was gradual. However, over the years the rate of decline has escalated. Fifteen years ago the average weekly attendance at St. Thomas' was approximately 300; today it is about half that. And while the financial situation at St. Thomas' is reasonably strong for the moment, without the critical mass to support its ministry, coupled with increasing costs of church maintenance, funds can easily be depleted in about ten years, or less. It also needs to be said that we are in a vulnerable position, as eighty percent of the regular financial givings come from approximately twenty percent of the people, most of whom are seniors.

Having said that, there are churches that are doing well and in some instances showing significant health and growth – spiritually, socially, numerically, and financially. These are challenging times for the church, yet they are also exciting times in church life. Opportunities exist but they will require some creativity in the way we “package” what we have to offer.

In June of 2013, St. Thomas' leadership struck a committee (Site Planning Committee) “to investigate the possibilities of utilizing some of the church property to create a stream of income to help defray the cost of maintaining our aging church property” and to support the future ministry of St. Thomas'. After two years of hard work and professional input, the Site Planning Committee submitted its report to the parish with five different options. However, it was felt by the leadership of the parish that we cannot make a decision on property until we have a renewed vision for the parish. Why invest in a building when there may not be a congregation and ministry ten years from now? Hence, in the winter of 2015, a new Visioning Committee was formed to discern what God wants for St. Thomas'.

It was a discernment process right from its inception, beginning with prayer. Over the course of the next twenty months the Visioning Committee organized many events, starting with a series of educational sermons to help the congregation better appreciate the many ways we understand church, what was Jesus' BIG idea of church, and its purpose. There were also a number of parish gatherings, workshops, internal and external focus groups and Vestry retreats, all geared to engage the parish and the neighbourhood in identifying “what God wants” for St. Thomas'. It is also important to understand that the Committee put great effort into educating itself on church and congregational development through seminars, written articles and books.

The vision that evolved supports a parish ministry that would see St. Thomas' stay in its present location, at the “gateway” to the downtown eastside of St. John's. While there was no insistence on staying at the present location, there were some, both internally and externally, who felt that because of its location in the heritage corner of the city and with new government investments in the surrounding area, coupled with the particular needs of the east end, including HMP, St. Thomas' would be best suited for ministry at 8 Military Road.

Noteworthy, however, is that the vision calls for significant change. While the Committee is not yet in a position to define what those changes are or may be, it was identified by the people through the discernment process that we cannot continue doing things the way we always did and expect the congregation to grow. It was no surprise to the Committee that the generation(s) most absent from the church are the 18 – 40-year olds. Church culture as we understand it is foreign to this age group. If we are to lead them to faith, the way in which we “do church” has to change, including church space and worship. For example, our current church building was designed for a style of worship that was used predominantly on Sunday. It makes little sense in this day and age to maintain such a huge building for a couple of hours one day of the week. The space could be much better utilized if it was made into a multi-purpose space (for parish and outside groups) so that it could be used all week long. Moreover, if we are to reach the missing generations, the worship space needs to be more accommodating.

Also critical to the visioning and discernment process were the “Seven Marks of a Healthy Church” as identified by the Church of England in a 2004 study done as a process for church revitalization. Churches that are healthy and growing incorporate all seven of these marks of mission. They are:

- **Energized by Faith**

*This is a church that moves people to experience God’s love and, in turn, wants to serve God. It is also a church that allows people to wrestle with and engage Scripture, and to reflect on their own experience of grace.*

- **Outward-looking Focus**

*This is a church that is concerned with a “whole life” rather than a “church life.” It is a church that has considerable knowledge of the local area and is willing to partner with other groups – religious or secular – in response to human needs. It is a church that is in the business of bridge building and is passionate about social justice.*

- **Seeks to Find out What God Wants**

*This mark of a healthy church starkly makes it clear that the church is first and foremost God’s Church. It is Jesus’ BIG Idea and it belongs to him. Hence, it is not a church that is reacting and trying to please everyone – to keep everyone happy – but a church that seeks to find out what God wants and is willing to pay the cost.*

- **Faces the Cost of Change**

*Healthy churches are those who embrace change. It recognizes that real change is more about changing norms, habits, even beliefs, and not necessarily the fabric and structures – although it is prepared to face the cost of structural change if necessary.*

- **Operates as a Community**

*The distinction is made here between the church as a social club only interested in keeping its members happy and a community that works together for the good of all. Moreover, it is not an organization or gathering of individuals, but a faith community where relationships matter.*

- **Makes Room for All**

*There are no “cliques” in this church. This is a church that helps people to “belong” and works hard to include everyone. The key words here are inclusion and hospitality.*

- **Does a Few Things Well**

*This is a church that is focused, rather than uncontrolled – trying to do everything and in the end doing nothing. A church that does a few things and does them well enjoys what it does and is relaxed about what is NOT being done.*

Biblically speaking, Jesus has already defined our mission and vision. He taught us to pray for it in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." He commanded us how to live it with the two great commandments: Love God and love neighbour. He taught us what to do in the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." But the mission and vision should also be specific to time and place. As an example, our needs are quite different from those of Christians living in Nigeria. The new mission and vision of our parish call us to be more outward-looking, hospitable and inclusive, with an emphasis on matters of social justice; to be a place for seekers as well as believers - open doors, open space; and for the people of the parish to think a little differently about the way we do things, and to be creative. Finally, it is important to understand that the new vision and mission of the parish, along with the core values, **was and is the work of the people of God in this parish**. This is what you said to us and what you believe God wants for this parish. It was the business of the Visioning Committee to compile, study, decipher, and formulate your contributions into what follows.

**THE NEW VISION AND MISSION**

**Vision Statement: To be a *radically welcoming servant church*.**

*(Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no vision the people perish" (KJV). Your vision is a picture of your congregation's highest potential, what you want to be. True vision comes from beyond you; it is an effort to seek God's will. But it is also a part of you and gives meaning, purpose and motivation. It was obvious in and through the many parish gatherings, and especially the workshop on the Seven Marks of a Healthy Church, that the Parish needs to raise the bar on all aspects of a healthy church. The new vision makes that clear. The new vision also gives new meaning to the old way of identifying St. Thomas' as the "Old Garrison Church." It is now the "New Garrison." That is to say, it is to be a place where St. Thomas' troops are prepared for the new spiritual frontier. It is to be a haven for seekers, doubters and believers, and for those who desire to know and apply their new-found faith in the service of Christ – welcoming, exploring, and serving.*

**Mission Statement: A community of believers, exploring our faith in Christ and embracing our neighbourhood through sharing and caring.**

*(This mission statement reflects the primary core values that came out of the visioning process – sacred hospitality, outward-looking, and wayfinding – and is grounded in the Christian community and anchored in Christ.)*

## **CORE VALUES**

**Sacred Hospitality:** Key to sacred hospitality is inclusion into a loving community, welcoming people and helping them to belong, and finding a spiritual home, with emphasis on relationships and diversity. This exercise in hospitality incorporates helping those who experience alienation in their lives find a safe haven.

**Outward-Looking:** Outward-looking is really about being more visible to the watching world and providing tangible proof of the loving God we profess and believe in. The aim here is at the very least a focus on social justice, outreach, and partnerships. Outward-looking is servant ministry, love in the concrete.

**Wayfinding:** Spiritually, we are all travelers seeking to find our way (wayfinding) through the maze of life. At St. Thomas' it is imperative that we find a way to invite, include and encourage depth and expression in our faith community, and to help doubters and seekers enhance their understanding and experience of God – to find their way. The emphasis here is on spiritual nurture and exploration of the faith.

## **APOSTOLIC SUPPORTS/PRIORITIES**

Throughout the discernment process people also recognized God in the midst of other areas that need to be addressed. We labeled these as apostolic supports, characteristics of the apostolic tradition that are necessary for the Mission, Vision, and Core Values to have their full effect. They are:

- **Worship**

*Worship is the primary activity of all Christians. At worship, we practise the art of loving, fulfilling the two great commandments, the love of God and of neighbour. Worship is to be planned and shaped to reflect and support the Core Values in the context of the church's tradition.*

- **Family and Youth**

*Through the discernment process 'family and youth' was identified as a priority ministry. The challenge is to deliver this ministry in ways that, not only fit with the Mission and Vision of the parish, but that inspire curiosity in creative ways. As a priority ministry, it needs a vast investment of time, talent, and treasure.*

- **Leadership Training**

*Scripture is clear that we cannot expect people to do the work of ministry for the building up of the church without the proper training. This is also an area of ministry we need to invest in.*

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

It is the Vision and Mission that determine the parish needs – programs, ministries, buildings, money – and not the other way around. When the Site Planning Committee had completed its work, it presented the parish with five different options. In summary, they are:

- 1) Continue to operate the parish in its present location with the same infrastructure;
- 2) Amalgamate with another parish;
- 3) Vacate the existing site and move into a new building (as a single parish);
- 4) Use the property for a Diocesan Facility;
- 5) Re-purpose some of the parish's excess property.

After careful examination and by deduction, the Visioning Committee eliminated Options 1, 3 and 4, as they did not support the new Vision/Mission of the parish and its Core Values. The two remaining options (now renumbered), with an additional third, will be presented to the parish.

### **OPTION ONE: Change and Re-purpose**

As previously mentioned, there were a number of people throughout the visioning process, both internal and external, who felt that St. Thomas' would best serve the downtown east end by staying in its present location. Our Bishop also noted, despite his concern about an overabundance of buildings, that St. Thomas' probably needs to stay. This Option, which was also identified by the Site Planning Committee, best suits the new Vision and Mission of the parish.

It may, however, involve significant change. If the Parish of St. Thomas' is going to have a ministry that spans the next several years it will need other sources of revenue. The Site Planning Committee presented as an option to demolish the Parish Hall and "include the site footprint in a larger land development. With the demolition of the Parish Hall, projected repairs and maintenance for the Church and site amenities would be reduced from approximately \$100,000 to \$70,000." Moreover, with the right development option "annual returns realized by the Parish would be between \$120,000 and \$160,000."

In line with the Vision, it may also mean the re-purposing of other space within the church building itself. The church basement may need to be developed to meet the needs of both the parish and the greater community. Worship space may also need to change to be more accommodating for seekers and for new ways of extending hospitality. Certainly the Core Values would dictate how the space is to be used for Sacred Hospitality, Outward-looking, and Wayfinding. Here, the emphasis would be on designing space and upgrading technology that would be more inviting, relational, and serving, with the overall intent of growing the parish - spiritually, numerically, organically.

This Option would also mean investments in training for lay and clergy; investments and creativity in the way we address other priority ministries, not the least of which is Youth and Family; and investments in property for new office space and to maximize program delivery. All this, of course, is subject to Diocesan approval.

### **OPTION TWO: Amalgamation**

It has been said that the Anglican Church has an edifice complex, i.e., we are overly concerned with buildings and property. Moreover, it can also be said that Newfoundland Anglicans are very parochial, which restricts our outlook beyond the parish boundaries. Having said that, it is becoming more and more difficult to maintain the large structures we have that in their heyday were built for 1200 people and now are occupied by only 150.

In his Pastoral Letter to the Diocese, dated September 2014, our Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Geoff Peddle, said that “the number of church buildings (and other properties!) the Anglican and Catholic churches oversee today is a burden for us.” He goes on to say, “The Christian journey must be about transformation and not simply the preservation of the past... In my opinion, our multitude of buildings and properties today are not only consuming too much of our time and energy, but are also standing in the way of new ministries and renewed communities.”

There is certainly a lot to be said for amalgamation with another parish to new premises or the existing premises of either parish. Maintenance and operating costs would be significantly reduced, there would be more funds available to enhance programs and ministries, and there would be a stronger vibrant community. But there are also drawbacks to amalgamation and sacrifices to be made. With amalgamation, you may lose the spirit and culture of the worshipping congregation. With amalgamation to existing premises you give up control and it is often seen as one parish becoming the saviour of the other. Amalgamation also takes time, probably as much as 2 – 5 years. Do we have that time? Note also that amalgamation fits nowhere into the new Vision and Mission of St. Thomas’ as identified by the discernment process. Nevertheless, in the combined wisdom of the Visioning Committee it was felt that it is an Option that cannot be ignored if there is to be a future ministry for the people of St. Thomas’.

### **OPTION THREE: Change and Re-purpose/Amalgamation**

Proceed with Option One but with an open door (or invitation) to any other church that wishes to talk about amalgamation.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee is recommending **Option Three: Change and Re-purpose/Amalgamation**, authorizing the parish to proceed in developing the property in ways that best suit the new Vision and Mission and securing much needed funds for the future ministry of St. Thomas’ in its present location. Option Three also makes allowance for the parish and ministry team to explore other ways of “doing” church in line with its Core Values. It also leaves the door wide open for serious conversation with other parishes for amalgamation, either to a new location or to the premises of an existing parish.