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‘NOTHING’S LIKE IT USED TO BE’

CLIMATE, ECONOMIC CHANGES RENEW FOOD SECURITY EFFORTS
IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

PHOTO: DOLORES HARVEY



Ask people about buying food in Newfoundland and Labrador, and you'll start hearing a few consistent comments: that fresh produce can be very expensive, that storm-related shipping delays can cut off the supply of food, and that the island of Newfoundland has, at any given time, three days of fresh food on the shelves.

Whether the last assertion is true or not, the nature of food security in Newfoundland and Labrador is both economic and geographic—the province is far away from major centres of

agricultural production. The weather can be harsh, the soil is rocky, and the region's growing season is short. Decades of job losses, and the problems that follow them, have made it difficult for people to afford healthy, fresh food. And then there's the anticipated and palpable effects of climate change: worse storms, changing growing seasons and more stretched resources.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, Anglicans are taking notice of these challenges, and they're also taking action. ▶



“The population I work with... they can go to soup kitchens, they can get some assistance from the government. But the quality and the standard of food that they’re able to buy is very poor.”

—*Brenda Halley*

► In the 1996 Rome Declaration on World Food Security, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization defined food security as universal “physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet...dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

This means that food security, conceptually, isn’t limited to the idea of running out of food on the shelves. It can mean that you just can’t afford the spinach that is on the shelf, and are left to other, less nutritious options. It can also mean that there is nowhere from which to procure food, or that the shipments can’t make it. All of these conditions can apply to Newfoundland and Labrador.

And as climate change advances, such circumstances can change—and get worse.

Fresh produce—and community

In St. John’s, questions around food security and climate change inspired Brenda Halley to approach the Anglican Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, which she also attends, about planting a community garden.



Halley is a social worker whose team focuses on people living with mental health issues and addictions.

“There’s a high rate of unemployment, and there’s a high correlation between suicide ideation and addiction issues when there’s nothing to do during the day. There’s no job, there’s no fisheries and you’re home,” Halley says.

The garden project, which began last year with help from a grant from Eastern Health, would give Halley’s clients the chance to work the land and eat the produce they grew. Eight raised beds were installed at the cathedral. But, she says, food security was always on her mind.

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PHOTO: NATALIE SHUTTLEWORTH

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The social worker says she supports people from all walks of life, including those with lucrative professions, but those who struggle economically were most interested in the garden project "because they don't have access to the quality of food that their bodies want." She cites the example of one person who can't work and feels constant stress from bills. He found comfort in the garden, being able provide himself with fresh vegetables.

The garden project has also built community, Halley says. Thirty-six people attended a barbecue at the end of the last season which included food from the garden. On Fridays, after working in the garden, people would stay with Halley and do yoga. Around the garden grew a community of people, she says.

Gardeners also got familiarized with the church and the grounds, with Archdeacon Roger Whalen, rector of the cathedral, providing tours and getting to know people.

For Whalen, community is a primary goal of the project, a chance for participants to nurture plants and relationships. He says that people in poverty will struggle to obtain healthy food, but that this is not a universal problem in Newfoundland, which is also home to wealthy and middle-class people. For poorer people, though, "a bag of chips is a lot more accessible to them than a salad," he says.

"The way I look at it, the way I pray for it, is we are enabled to continue to connect with the community to provide what's missing, what's needed for the people in our community.

In terms of our community garden project, it's trying to grow their health and welfare," he explains. "What does the community need, how can we address those needs? And do it as the church?"

Halley agrees. "We built community, and that was the beautiful part of it. The fellowship we experienced together was really powerful."



"Peas grown on my
kitchen window sill"

PHOTO: CRYSTLE MICHELIN

A boost to self-sufficiency as climate changes

In Labrador, as with Newfoundland, obtaining fresh, healthy food can be a challenge. Labrador is geographically diverse: resource extraction in the west, central hydroelectric plants and isolated coastal regions. The picture of food varies from place to place.

As archdeacon of Labrador, Julie Brace is familiar with ministry needs in each of these regions—and she is especially acquainted with Churchill Falls, where she has lived for 13 years, and Rigolet, where she serves as rector of St. Timothy's Parish.

Brace says Churchill Falls is a company town—that company being Nalcor Energy, the provincial Crown corporation that generates energy in Newfoundland and Labrador. Churchill Falls is home to Canada's second largest hydroelectric generator, which is operated by Nalcor.

Everything in the town, including the church, was built by Nalcor, Brace says.

"I honestly can't even tell you how much the rent is on my house because it's taken out of my husband's salary," she explains, adding that it might be around \$98 to \$100 each month. And the hydro bill? "There's not even a meter on the house."

The town grocer is operated by Nalcor, which means food is relatively accessible there. "Because we're a company town, the prices here are comparable to St. John's and to Nova Scotia," she says. There's also a travel allowance for employees, and Churchill Falls is connected by roads to Labrador City and Happy Valley-Goose Bay, giving further options for shopping.

The story is different on the coast, in places like Rigolet, Brace says—an area connected to larger cities by warm-weather ferry service and fair-weather flights. She says that while there is a government subsidy for food, quality goes down as winter comes. Despite best efforts, the weather can destroy fresh, sensitive produce—even exposure between the airport and the store is problematic. "Greens won't make it, like lettuce—it's too far, too cold. When I go to the grocery store, even in some of the best times of the year, it's produce that wouldn't be left on the shelf here."

Nevertheless, "prices go up in the winter, but they never seem to get back to the prices before the winter

months. It's just steadily climbing, and jobs are not as plentiful."

Thanks to climate change, such problems are emerging more often—even at the start of summer. Pamela Frieda, who is temporarily working as food security coordinator in Hopedale, said the community was experiencing the problem "right now," when she spoke with the *Journal* on June 28. "The shelves are really empty at the stores here."

At the time, the community was waiting for the food supply to ship by ferry. "They are meeting our demands," Frieda says. "They will ship on the plane if they have to."

Hopedale, an Inuit community governed within Nunatsiavut, is home to about 600. Located roughly halfway between Rigolet and Nain, the coastal community is pretty far away from anything.

The problem with that distance, especially when the weather is bad: "Freight charges [by boat] are really low compared to freight charges on the plane.... That affects us too, because we have to pay some of those charges as well."

In communities like Hopedale and Rigolet, the high costs of shipping food have prompted people to consider alternatives old and new: keeping traditional means of hunting and gathering alive while exploring gardening and hydroponics.

"I was actually surprised when I posted online on social media looking for interested persons in starting a gardening program this year," Frieda says. "I was expecting a maximum of five to participate."

Instead, more than 20 people signed on.

Crystle Michelin, Rigolet-based food security coordinator with Food First NL, has experienced a similar surge in interest from gardeners. Like Hopedale, Rigolet is predominantly Inuit and is part of Nunatsiavut. Of its 300 residents, 19 are involved in the backyard gardening program, with another 12 participating as they are able. In other words, more than 10 per cent of the town has decided to start growing produce.

Problems with food availability in Rigolet, combined with traditional views on living off the land, have spurred this involvement. "We have one supplier, one grocery store. In this town there's no competition," Michelin says. "The prices are really high. Very often, too, we have low-quality foods, when it comes to



Crystle Michelin, left, delivers Good Food Boxes to participants in Rigolet.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CRYSTLE MICHELIN

produce and frozen meat.”

And with one airline serving the town, sometimes food from afar is just not available, she says. Ships come in the summer—but summer weather can be long delayed. “That hasn’t even started yet, and it’s almost July—it’s a very short shipping season,” she explains.

Rigolet has responded to food security problems with more than gardening. One initiative—which Brace says began inside the church but was quickly taken on by the community—involves placing bulk food orders ahead of winter.

The Good Food Box project was born, Brace says, as a way of addressing a quandary particular to coastal Labrador: the only people who can afford grocery store prices are also the only ones who can afford to buy their

food in advance at wholesale prices, leaving others to fend for themselves. The Good Food Box project pooled money together, allowing Rigolet residents to bulk order frozen meat and share the discount. Michelin now oversees the program for the town.

Brace says that increasing climate and economic pressures—including reduced ferry operations to the community—mean people in places like Rigolet are beginning to organize around issues of food security. “And they’re proud of themselves, too. They’re not looking for someone to lead from outside.” Brace says that self-awareness of isolation in places like coastal Labrador makes it easier to try new things, since driving to a neighbouring town’s grocery store isn’t an option. “Necessity is the mother of invention.”

New—and traditional—approaches to change

Some of that invention includes hydroponic projects, started both in Rigolet and Hopedale. Greenhouses are on the minds of both Michelin and Frieda. Frieda says the Inuit community government recently donated a greenhouse to Hopedale for food security purposes; the project will come online in September. And as the [CBC recently reported](#), students at the K-12 Amos Comenius Memorial School in Hopedale started growing hydroponic vegetables last winter.

Michelin says a community greenhouse in Rigolet could be used to help meet the community’s needs. “If we have enough room and enough interest and enough participation, we can produce our own food.”

The economic realities in places like Rigolet help dictate their need for self-sufficiency. In a globalized world of international trade, tiny Rigolet doesn’t exactly fit into grand economic schemes. “One thing about Rigolet, unfortunately, is our lack of economic development—we have none,” Michelin says. “We’re a town that doesn’t export anything, we don’t process anything. So, it’s poor.”

Michelin, who is Inuit, says the people of Rigolet have been living off the land for many years—but increasing modernization has meant increasing prices. Seaworthy watercraft and outboard motors can cost many thousands of dollars. Guns are expensive, ammunition is

expensive, snowmobiles are expensive.

“Normally, you would think of all of these watercraft and snowmobiles and these guns...the main idea would be for recreational use,” Michelin says. However, in Rigolet—and in the North, in general—they are ways of feeding your family. A boat can take you to where ducks nest—which means you can eat the eggs. A boat or a snowmobile can connect you to Goose Bay (and its comparative abundance of goods and services) within a four- or five-hour trip, instead of an \$800 flight.

Michelin tells the *Journal* that she brought her baby boy for his first trip to Goose Bay in the spring. “I bundled him up and took him [along],” she says. “Not 100 years ago, people were doing this on dogsled.

“I think the old ways have always been here. I don’t think it ever left at any point. We have always lived in the way of our ancestors,” she says. “If you walk up and down the road and meet 100 people today in Rigolet and ask them what their ideal food is, 99 per cent of the time people say it’ll be country food. We catch wild salmon across the bay all summer long. [There’s] trout in our backyard. In the winter, in the fall and the spring we eat geese—we always have a nice goose for Thanksgiving or Christmas.” Ptarmigan arrives on the dinnerplate in winter, and ducks in the spring.



After hearing an MLA promise to fly food via helicopter and plane to Labrador following “storm after storm,” Brenda Halley wondered why politicians haven’t suggested more empowering approaches to the problem.

PHOTO: JOSHUA DUGGAN/FICKR

Climate change has made living out these traditional ways difficult, even with modern tools. Ice hasn’t formed where expected, limiting travel for essentials like geese and wood. Some distances can no longer be traversed, “because we don’t have those cold temperatures. We have a lot of rain. We don’t have the freezing cold of Labrador that we once grew up on. We don’t have our ice as early in the year as we should. So, it’s decreasing our hunting ability for sure,” Michelin says. Movement of animals is likewise affected, sometimes making them inaccessible.

Climate change doesn’t necessarily lengthen the gardening season, either, since snowfall has been replaced by “rain and fog”—not sunshine. “It used to be called global warming, once,” she says. “When it comes down to us people on the ground, with our feet on the earth, it’s climate change. Nothing’s like it used to be.”

Changing political approaches

Michelin says she hopes the people of Rigolet will “continue to acknowledge our self-sustainability...to try to grow our own food, which goes hand in hand, always, with harvesting our own food. Our harvesting of wild berries, our harvesting of wild animals.” She says she hopes people remain aware that this traditional view of diet—now trendy in southern Canada and elsewhere—is “the healthiest approach. That’s not something we want to give up or are willing to give up.”

Back on the island of Newfoundland, Halley echoes Michelin’s view that local production of local food is important to the culture and economy.

She and her partner Susan have three children, and “this is where they’re going to grow up.

“Lots of times, we expect fully that our children will move away to gain employment somewhere else.” Thus, the idea of creating jobs appeals to her—creating reasons for people to stay.

She says she would like to see a shift in political rhetoric around how to respond to food insecurity in

places like Newfoundland and Labrador. After hearing a politician promise to fly food via helicopter and plane to Labrador following “storm after storm,” she wondered why politicians haven’t suggested more empowering approaches to the problem.

“I’m thinking, people in Labrador are really smart, and they’ve been hunting and fishing for years,” she says. “Why aren’t we supporting them with a hydroponic green house? We provide employment, they become self-sufficient. We’re flying in food for people when they can grow it here, and it gives them something to do.”

However, she says, approaches have to be practical. Halley cited the infamous case of Newfoundland’s ill-fated cucumber greenhouse. Advanced by former Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Brian Peckford and Philip Sprung’s Enviroponics, the Mount Pearl-based project consumed more than \$13 million from taxpayers—and \$22 million in total—before Enviroponics went bankrupt and the facility was sold for a dollar. The greenhouse shut down soon afterward. [The story is so infamous that CBC Archives wrote about it again last year.](#)

Halley says she remembers the project and its unearthly orange glow, visible from St. John’s at the time. The problem, she says, is that the hydroponic greenhouse wasn’t used to grow produce of local interest. Instead, Peckford proposed that Newfoundland might position itself to dominate the world cucumber market. The plan failed, and cows ate many of the 800,000 cucumbers grown—at a cost of \$27.50 per cucumber to taxpayers. The problem, as the CBC reported at the time: Newfoundlanders ate, on average, half a cucumber per capita per year.

“Really, cucumber is probably the least popular thing here to eat,” Halley says.

While the Sprung greenhouse serves as a cautionary tale, Halley says new and innovative projects are needed in Newfoundland and Labrador. They just need to be focused on the province’s unmet nutritional, cultural and economic needs.

“I’m really, just as a citizen in St. John’s, pretty bored with the calibre of ideas from politicians,” she says. “We need industry here, and people have energy here. They’re diligent. They want to work and earn what they get, because they just feel better.

“Who doesn’t feel better from a full day’s work?” ■