

By Linda Nicholls

PRIMATE OF THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

ON BEING CHURCH

Based on an address to the Council of General Synod

PHOTO: KARL FREDRICKSON/UNSPASH

For many reasons, including the changes brought about by the pandemic, I have found myself reflecting on what it means to “be church”—and in particular, what it means to be the Anglican Church of Canada. We are a diverse collection of people from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences: Indigenous people, descendants of early settlers, and relative newcomers. We are dispersed in a wide array of settings and circumstances: urban, suburban, rural and isolated—from coast to coast to coast. What are the assumptions, principles and values that we share, and are prepared to commit to together, as we face what will be a different future?

Around us we see many models of “being church.” Some churches are completely independent congregations, where decisions are made for that particular gathered community by that community alone. Others belong to denominations where key decisions are made centrally and apply to everyone

around the world. Still others are in between, with some commitments made locally and others requiring broader consultation.

I suspect that Jesus would be surprised by what we have created as “the church” from his teachings! There is much about church life that finds its roots in the gatherings of the synagogue, or the civil structures of Roman life, or the political realities of the early Christian communities, or subsequent schisms—and only tangentially in the gospel.

There can be many ways to live out the core principles of the faith in community. The study of these things is called “ecclesiology.” Of course, we believe that our particular form of “being church” is the best for us, though we have made changes over time. We do need to know and understand those things that are particularly Anglican, the basic principles that undergird and shape our common life. They are worth naming, and



Jesus taught the disciples (and by extension all of us through the scriptures) what kind of community he expects. We are a community...where no one is more important than another.

PHOTO: SAMUEL MARTINS/UNSPLASH

committing ourselves to, so that the life we envisage for our Anglican Church of Canada is rooted there first, and so that our decisions for the future will reflect our beliefs.

The church is first and foremost the people of God: a people who gather for worship, prayer, mutual care, education and fellowship, all in preparation for being sent out into the world.

Jesus taught the disciples (and by extension all of us through the scriptures) what kind of community he expects. We are a community:

- where no one is more important than another (“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” Mark 9:35);
- where each member loves one another as Jesus loves us (“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you,” John 15:12);
- that is called to unity (“so that they may be one, as [Jesus and his Father] are one,” John 17:11).

St. Paul exhorted the early church to be:

- a place where all are equal (“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” Galatians 3:28).

St. Peter likewise reminded early Christians that:

- our primary call is to serve one another (“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received,” 1 Peter 4:10).

In such a community:

- sharing resources for the common good of all is expected (“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need,” Acts 2:44-45).

St. Paul also gives us repeatedly, in his letters, a powerful central image of the church as the body of Christ with Jesus as its head, and each of us as members—not just in an organizational sense, but a visceral one:

- “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” (Romans 12:5)

This joint membership with one another and with Christ is experienced, first and foremost, when we gather around the common table:

- “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (1 Corinthians 10:17)

St. Paul has crystal-clear insight into the practical implications of these convictions for the church:

- “Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” (Ephesians 4:15-16)

This is much more than a compelling metaphor—though it is that! Perhaps its most extensive working out in scripture comes in the 12th chapter of Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. Here we read of unity through diversity, of interdependence, of the elimination of distinctions between strong and weak, inferior and superior. In such a body, we acknowledge each member’s gifts, and our mutual need of them all.

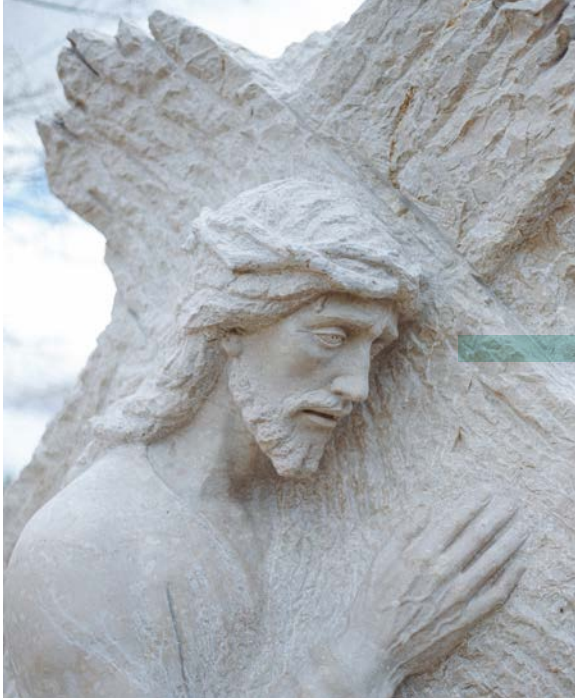


PHOTO: WESLEY TINGE/UNSPASH



If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

(1 Corinthians 12:26-27)

We each have distinctive roles to play, but we all share a common commitment. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26-27)

As the “body of Christ”—the church—spread across the Middle East in differing ways, it was assumed that its members were still one, caring for one another in different parts of the world, as demonstrated in the collection for the church in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-2, 2 Corinthians 8:3-5). They discerned together for the sake of the whole as in Acts 15, when the challenge of welcoming Gentiles into this new community of Jews required a council to discern and recognize the work of the Spirit in their midst.

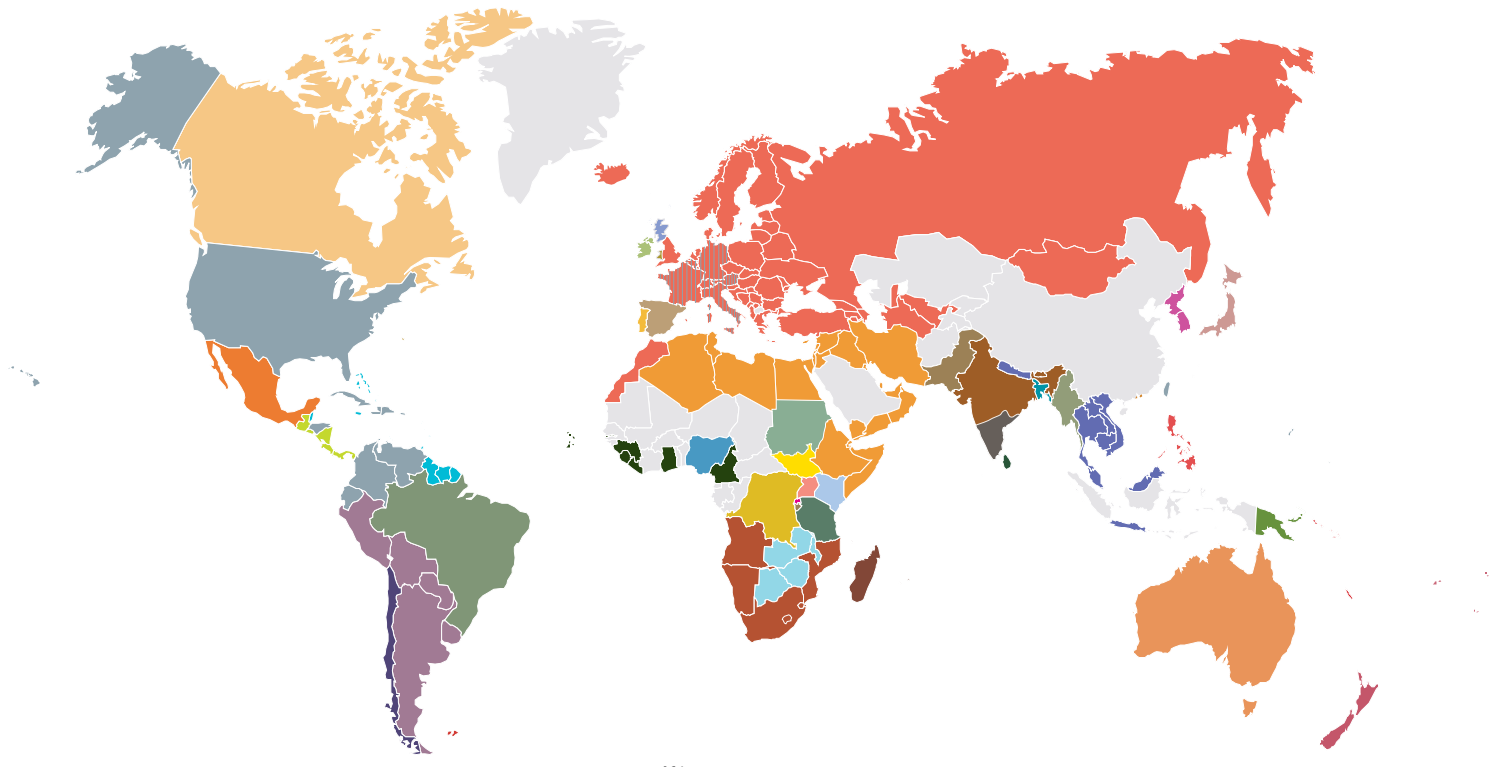
There was a dynamic relationship between the local Christian community and the wider family of God, as it grew and needed diverse leadership.

- Deacons emerged to offer service to those in need and keep the community informed of those needs; (Acts 6)
- priests emerged for sacramental ministry as episcopal ministry (the ministry of oversight by bishops) could not meet all sacramental needs;
- and ultimately bishops linked the local communities

to the wider church as the church spread and grew—to preserve faith, unity and order, and to be the visible symbol of continuity between past, present and future through the laying on of hands.

We express this unity and connectedness succinctly in the Nicene Creed when we declare our belief in “one, holy, catholic [meaning universal] and apostolic Church.”

As Anglicans, we followed our ancestry in the Roman Catholic church through formal structures that help us to maintain continuity, but with a reformed understanding of the synodical place of laity, clergy and bishops discerning together. We established dioceses in a geographic area for the sake of ministry as needed in local places led by a bishop. Over the years diocesan boundaries and configurations change to meet the needs of the church geographically and culturally. In the last decade, the diocese of Keewatin became the new Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh and the Anglican Parishes of the Central Interior became the Territory of the People. Ecclesiastical provinces coordinate ministry for a number of dioceses together. We have four ecclesiastical provinces in the Anglican Church of Canada: British Columbia and Yukon, Rupert's



ANGLICAN COMMUNION MAP COURTESY OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COLOURS INDICATE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUPINGS

Land, Ontario and Canada. We then connect with the wider community of other churches and in the worldwide Anglican Communion as the national province of Canada.

We are an international family of juridically independent but recognizably connected churches, in which each part assists the other, and which together share a common liturgical heritage and commitment to essential elements: ordered ministry, episcopal leadership, the creeds (Apostles' and Nicene), and the two primary sacraments: baptism and Eucharist.

There are important lessons for our church today in the scriptural foundations and the historical evolution that I have sketched here.

Anglican structures have sought to honour unity and context. We are one family in the Anglican Church of Canada. By history and mutual commitment to the See of Canterbury we are linked with other Anglican families around the world in the Anglican Communion. Within Canada, we make decisions together for the sake of the whole. That is not easy when our contexts differ so widely: rural and urban, isolated north and densely populated south, wealthy and not, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. But as Scripture reminds us, we are called to care about

all parts of our family, to help one another and to make decisions together. Our primary purpose is not our own good, not even the survival of the Anglican Church, but our witnessing to the Good News—the gospel of Jesus Christ—by building communities of faith where that gospel may be seen and heard.

This requires deep listening to one another and a willingness to share. As a national church, we have committed to sharing resources: local parish to diocese, diocese to internal province and to the national church, and the national church in turn sharing through ministries both globally and locally—including redistribution of funds to support parts of the church here in Canada that need assistance, through the Council of the North and Indigenous ministries, for example. There is a circle of relationship in that sharing based on our commitment to one another: local-provincial-national and back to local.

All this is a tangible expression of St. Paul's call for the stronger and larger to help the smaller and weaker—not paternalistically, but as family with the same goals in the gospel, and with accountability one to the other. That is why a portion of resources from the parish goes to the diocese, and a portion of that comes to the national



PHOTO: SHANE ROUNCE/UNSPLASH



- **We are one in Christ, siblings under God.**
- **We are a body of differing parts needing each other—especially as we walk together with the emerging Indigenous church.**
- **We are accountable to each other and committed to each other.**

General Synod, and a portion of that in turn is shared with the Anglican Communion. In each case, those resources serve the local level through programs, information, grants and connections.

When we hit hard times, or the kinds of extraordinary challenges we are currently facing, there can sometimes be a temptation to guard our precious and threatened resources, to keep them for ourselves and our own. But for the Christian community, it is precisely at such times when we are called to share our joys and sorrows, and discover together that we are stronger in partnership, when we choose together how we will face the challenges. That demands transparency and honest, direct, respectful conversations, which we know may not always be easy. To do this well requires trust and hard work: trust that loving our neighbour as ourselves is at the heart of our relationship; trust that each member is committed equally to the good of their local expression of the church, and the good of the whole expression of our church, collectively; and hard work, to make those things a daily reality.

We in the Anglican Church of Canada are entering a time of transformation. We are discerning our future mission, resetting our priorities and our strategies for

achieving them, examining our governance structures, evaluating our resource requirements and opportunities, finding ways to support the emerging self-determining Indigenous church, and so much else. We do all this as a church committed to being the Body of Christ, locally, regionally, nationally and globally, as Anglicans, and in partnership with other churches, including those with whom we are in full communion. Through the pandemic we have discovered that we are resilient, creative and capable of change far more than we had thought.

I pray that as we move through this period of discernment, we will keep a core understanding of what it means to “be church” at the heart of our choices. For me, that understanding is rooted in Scripture and history.

- We are one in Christ, siblings under God.
- We are a body of differing parts needing each other—especially as we walk together with the emerging Indigenous church.
- We are accountable to each other and committed to each other. Our motto might well be that of the Three Musketeers: “All for one and one for all.”

My friends in the Body of Christ, with God’s help, may this be so for us in our time and place. ■