

By Matthew Townsend

EDITOR

# NORTH AND SOUTH

‘WHAT IS THE REALITY TO WHICH WE HAVE BEEN CALLED?’

As the Anglican Church of Canada considers its future in an ongoing and evolving strategic planning process, it seems likely to encounter a familiar question: What about the North?

Not long after I joined the *Anglican Journal* team, I realized that the church’s presence in the North—and the North itself—can sometimes feel misunderstood. My very first conversation with a bishop in the North was with David Parsons, who shared in a two-hour discussion by phone that there was a pretty serious building-related problem in the diocese of the Arctic: “Our church

buildings are too small for the number of people who want to attend services.”

Appreciating the nature of “the North,” and the church we find there, isn’t a straightforward task. For me—a swamp-raised Floridian who hasn’t been further north than Winnipeg—it’s a topic that never seems adequately covered in the *Anglican Journal* by articles that never quite feel complete, no matter how long they are. How should the church face this question in its strategic planning process? What about the North?

“The North isn’t universal or monolithic,” diocese



of Brandon Bishop William Cliff, who also chairs the Council of the North, told me when I started asking about planning and the North. “The North in every province is expressed differently. The North in Ontario—if you’re in Toronto, ‘the North’ is in Muskoka. The real North we’re talking about is a huge part of Ontario that most of Ontario doesn’t even think about.”

It’s all, he said, a bit of a Gordian knot.

“In Manitoba, the North is north of 53—the 53rd parallel—and that conjures a different understanding. It means certain reserves and developments by Manitoba

Hydro. It conjures a history of a relationship with Hydro which has been rocky at best. It involves treaty rights, it involves Métis people and their ancestral lands.

“Then you go over to Saskatchewan, and the diocese of Saskatchewan’s concept of North is different from what it is in Manitoba. Same thing in Alberta. And then you go to Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut/Nunavik—you’re going to be dealing with a different understanding of ‘Northernness.’ How do you plan for that?”





“When I first came to the North, what grabbed my senses and my soul was the peacefulness. [Sometimes, this slower pace] can be infuriating—to wait for answers or wait for something to happen.”

—Lesley Wheeler-Dame, bishop of the diocese of Yukon



PHOTO: JOEL SPARKS / SHUTTERSTOCK

## Different contexts, same church

These varied realities make it difficult—perhaps impossible and inappropriate—to offer a single prescription for northern churches, according to other bishops who serve in the North.

Bishop Lesley Wheeler-Dame, who was elected in the diocese of Yukon in May of last year, is one such voice. Wheeler-Dame, who grew up in southwestern Ontario, found a more relaxed pace of life when she made the move. “When I first came to the North, what grabbed my senses and my soul was the peacefulness,” she told me. Sometimes, this slower pace “can be infuriating—to wait for answers or wait for something to happen.”

Yet, the bishop said, this waiting is one of the keys to a listening model of strategic planning, to which the strategic planning working group of the Council of General Synod (CoGS) recently shifted.

Listening to those practicing ministry in the North

can involve trying to appreciate contexts very different from those found in southern Canada. Often, these contexts involve Indigenous peoples, who make up a large percentage of the northern church.

Isaiah Larry Beardy works with northerners in two provinces, as Indigenous suffragan bishop of the Northern Manitoba Area Mission of the Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh and assistant bishop in the diocese of Brandon and Missinipi Northern Saskatchewan in the diocese of Saskatchewan. Context frames how he thinks about strategy. “We have to work from the locations we’re at and also the circumstances that are around us,” Beardy told me. He works with 14 communities, most of which have all-weather road access, ranging from about an hour north of Winnipeg up to Shamattawa, at the 58th parallel. Most of these are Cree communities—but three are Ojibwe, one is Métis and another is Dene. Two communities require flying in, including Shamattawa, at a cost of more than \$1,000 for a round-trip ticket.

At the time of my interview with Beardy, one of the roads had recently been flooded by heavy rains. The winter road season has also been impacted by climate change. And then there's COVID-19. There had been no cases in northern Manitoba, Beardy said, though life had been affected by the pandemic.

"Those are the things that we deal with in real life," Beardy said. Then there are the social issues, sometimes only known to southern Canadians as statistics, related to overcrowded housing, economic development and dependence upon very limited social assistance to purchase very expensive goods. People who live where he ministers might pay \$10 for a jug of milk—while trying to live on a \$200 monthly cheque, he said.

In his region, it's often volunteers who offer ministry in these circumstances—non-stipendiary clergy and lay people who balance other obligations with church work.

"I'm not sure the church as a whole grasps the difference" between leadership structures in the North and South, Wheeler-Dame said. "I believe that it is more a question of living within a certain context. We tend to pick up the realities around us—within our own sphere of reference. I find that what the South doesn't get is the reality that we don't have the same type of quick access to resources that are available in the South. That of course affects our leadership structure."

Wheeler-Dame cited a visit from her mother, a priest in the diocese of Huron, to Telegraph Creek, one of the diocese of Yukon's parishes in the civil province of British Columbia. Her mother commented on the amount of time needed to drive from one place to another. "So, the bishop cannot get out to visit communities and parishes in the same way. That doesn't mean we are deprived or

are a 'have-not' diocese. It just means we adapt and find a different way."

In the face of such different contexts, it might be tempting to imagine the Anglican Church in the North as a

separate, far-off entity—the 'have-nots' that are removed from the organization with a head office in Toronto. Bishop of Saskatchewan Michael Hawkins cautioned me against this kind of thinking, especially in terms of imagining a shared future for the church.

"One of the problems in any plan, or thinking about the North, is there can be a very dangerous tendency for us in the South (and from many points of view, I'm in the South): we tend to think of 'those people in the North' as opposed to understanding they're us in the North," Hawkins told me. "Sometimes people will say, 'What can we do for the people of the North?' It's the church. It's the Anglican Church of Canada there. It's us there; we are in the North. We have a large presence in the North and a large history—complicated in many ways, but we still have a real presence and ministry in the North."

Hawkins echoed what Cliff, Beardy and Wheeler-Dame had to say about the importance of local communities. This, he said, is where the process of strategic planning must start. "I think whatever direction we go in, and there will be a direction, [the approach] needs to be much nimbler than most of us can even imagine."

The Prince Albert-based bishop distinguished greater nimbleness from an oft-cited goal in strategic plans inside and outside the church: self-sufficiency. In the North, he said, "the church never really became a settled church. Some dioceses distinguish between self-sufficient parishes. We have none in Saskatchewan. No one is self-sufficient. And that's not a bad thing."

"I think the folks in the North have a lot that they can teach the rest of the church about what you can do with what little you have," Cliff said. "My folks in Brandon, we couldn't function without lay readers. We have lay readers who are amazing lay leaders who don't only just lead worship on Sundays but take funerals and do hospital visiting. They are genuinely very switched-on Christian leaders in their parishes. They just happen not to be ordained. I think the South could actually use a good dose of that, to de-clericalize a lot of the work of the parish that does not need to be clericalized."

Beardy said lay readers are very involved in the life of the church in his region—and this has only increased in the time of COVID-19. Many have stepped up to provide help with funerals during travel restrictions, ensuring the work of the church continues.

"Ministry in the North is alive," Beardy said.





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*—Michael Hawkins, bishop of the diocese of Saskatchewan*

PHOTO: JIM PRUITT / SHUTTERSTOCK

## Growing partnerships, evolving approaches

The bishops I spoke with were quick to acknowledge the generosity of donors located across Canada and of the church at large.

“If you ask most Anglicans what General Synod did or what their apportionment did, they would not say, at the very top of the list, ‘Support ministry in northern communities and congregations.’ And yet that is the case. It’s a remarkable commitment, and ongoing even in the midst of some budget tightening,” Hawkins said. “We [the council] are the largest budget item in the General Synod, which represents an ongoing, faithful and generous commitment of the church to ministry in the North.”

The partnership between North and South made significant strides during the latest process of strategic

planning, the bishop said. “Vision 2019 included an enormous emphasis on the ministry of the Anglican Church of Canada in the North. While we struggled to fulfill some of those goals, the emphasis in the planning document was commensurate with the commitment of Anglicans across the country and of General Synod to that ministry.”

Beardy also cited the support received from elsewhere. “We do depend a lot on the Anglican Church and Indigenous ministries, and also we do work with the Council of the North,” he said. In terms of strategy, the council, the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples (ACIP) and the national department of Indigenous Ministries, along with the church’s northern elements, “pretty well have to start looking at different ways of handling ministry.”

Beardy pointed to a budget deficit experienced last year by the Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh, for which he recently launched a [GoFundMe campaign](#) to seek additional donations. “The



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*—William Cliff, bishop of the diocese of Brandon*

message seems to be getting out there that we do need help to carry on the ministry.”

“Funding is always an issue here,” Cliff said. “We have a growing church in the North, and we have diminishing resources. That growing church is growing among people who cannot necessarily contribute in the way that parishes in the South can.

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Cliff mentioned that some donors he knows have been “amazed at the bang for the buck you can get. When the Council of the North puts on a program, we put in for a grant—and more often than not, there’s money left over and we end up turning it back. Because we’re really good at being careful and frugal and accounting for our money, because we are all accountable to each other.”

When generosity can’t create a church in the image of the South, how should the church function in the North?

In his diocese, Cliff said, he’s worked to develop locally raised clergy and has used Indigenous teaching circles and discernment circles to talk about candidates for ministry in the North. “How do we fit those kinds of adaptations into strategic plans?” he asked.

“The Council of the North, as a group, has repeatedly said that we need to look at who we are and what our mission is.” Cliff said that the emergence of the

Indigenous church—which, while not uniquely situated in the North, is largely present in the North—means a new kind of partnership. “We’re in a partnership in such a way that we’re both working with diminishing resources. The way the Council of the North functions has not really been revised in a long time. The documents that form the Council of the North are in the appendix of the General Synod handbook, and they’re from the ’70s. And all they refer to is ‘the North’—which I think in 1974 conjured a different vision in the church, conjured a different view of things. Which certainly isn’t the same relationship we have now.”

Hawkins said he’s seen a shift in how the North itself understands planning and partnerships. Back in the early 2000s, he said, the council tended to focus upon sustaining operations. “We needed to have a bishop, the bishop needed to have a staff, and we needed to have trained and paid clergy.” By 2009, however, the system had been eclipsed by an emphasis on emerging ministry, changing structures, greater cooperation, an emphasis on youth and experimentation.

“The former primate used to refer to the Council of the North as a kind of laboratory,” Hawkins said.

Part of the evolving approach to partnerships, planning and ministry involves the Indigenous church, now self-determining—which Hawkins, Cliff and Wheeler-Dame (all of whom identified as non-Indigenous bishops serving in dioceses with many Indigenous Anglicans) named as a key piece of any strategic planning process.



“The problem with General Synod is it can be a bit like a wrestling ring.... We need to have conversations across the church that do not make people feel more vulnerable and do not allow us all to turn into being defensive.”

—Michael Hawkins, bishop of the diocese of Saskatchewan

PHOTO: EMOTIONAL DEBATE ABOUT THE MARRIAGE CANON AT GENERAL SYNOD 2019, VANCOUVER, B.C. CREDIT: MILOS TOSIC

## Walking together, learning together, working together

Each bishop I spoke with emphasized that the process of strategic planning would need to involve a spirit of “walking together”—a phrase used throughout the Anglican Communion to suggest that groups who find themselves in disagreement can still continue their common journey.

It’s not unusual for this phrase to appear around debates regarding same-sex marriage in the communion—especially when disagreement seems intractable. Indeed, this was the case when General Synod released a statement on sexuality discernment at its 2010 meeting, which it again cited in the “Word to the Church” statement passed by CoGS and affirmed by General Synod in 2019.

After last year’s General Synod failed to pass a

resolution amending the marriage canon—thus not authorizing same-sex marriage throughout the church—walking together might have seemed a tall order. Public statements and speeches emphasized unity, but among people in favour of the resolution, quiet conversations around dinner tables and louder comments on social media offered a different take: the result of the vote was someone’s fault. The resentments and fears that emerged on each side seemed to tap into narratives about stark differences. It was that long-perceived distance between North and South. Or maybe it was the gulf between urban and rural people. Or perhaps conflict between orders (lay, clerical and episcopal) was at issue. And as National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop Mark MacDonald [told the \*Journal\* at the time](#), some blamed Indigenous Anglicans, assuming all had voted against the resolution.

A sentiment I heard emerge at the meeting, however, held that caricatures of the North, the South, Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people had no place in

the faith—and generally weren't accurate. Indeed, one finds some of Canada's most conservative Anglicans in Toronto, while many Northern Anglicans favour same-sex marriage. At the end of the day, it wasn't a walk in the park—but I think it's fair to say that Anglicans left the meeting walking together.

For people like Bishop Hawkins, the roles into which Canadians (northern and southern) are called at meetings like General Synod tend to reinforce this sort of adversarial thinking. For him, walking together is as much a literal call as a figurative one.

"One of the areas we have not worked on is to get people to visit each other. The problem with General Synod is it can be a bit like a wrestling ring," he said.

Hawkins described General Synod as a kind of neutral territory in which members serve neither as host nor guest. "I think when we meet as host and guest, we're often on our very best behavior, and we come with an openness and an appreciation for the other. I still have hope that we could develop more fully—there was an idea about this back in the '90s, some way of getting people to visit each other in their realities.

"We need to have conversations across the church that do not make people feel more vulnerable and do not allow us all to turn into being defensive."

A great deal of my conversation with Bishop Wheeler-Dame centred around this notion of learning about one another's reality in a loving way.

"There is no question in my mind but that we are called to live out Matthew 28:16-20. Not one of us has all the answers as to how we live out the Great Commission. We are all just fumbling along trying our best to understand what God is calling us to do and be," she said. "I believe that if we all acknowledge that 'my' context is different than 'your' context and that is okay, we will do well."

Wheeler-Dame said this acknowledgment involves listening. "We need each other and can learn from each other.... The differences don't make one better than the other but the differences are a blessing to, and in conjunction with, one another."

The bishop cited the Book of Acts, noting that the church, as it formed, "certainly had its struggles. And yet at the same time, they worshipped together even within those differences." Thus, moving beyond assumptions that the way someone—or some diocese—lives out

the gospel is "wrong" could lead to more learning and accompaniment.

"I need to acknowledge for myself that I must live into my present reality. My present reality is not going to be the same as yours, or another diocese. My present reality isn't even going to be the same in Whitehorse as it is in Old Crow, for example.

"Does that mean that either is wrong? No. It just means that that's the truth for them." As an example, she offered, "If I do lay training in a certain way in the diocese of Yukon, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is absolutely the right way. But it also doesn't mean that the diocese of Huron should do it in that way."

The bishop suggested we tend to ask the wrong question as we observe our differences, trying to discern which way is more "right or wrong" than the other. Instead, she said, we should just consider our different experiences as truth—and recognize that someone else's truth might benefit us. "I need to be willing to acknowledge that your truth is right for you, and that I can bring some of your truth into my reality."

Wheeler-Dame added that the unchanging truths across church contexts are found within the gospel and the Great Commission.

Arguably, one of the central purposes of self-determination—and the formation of a self-determining Indigenous church within the Anglican Church of Canada—is the recognition that contexts vary but the mission does not. In this sense, Bishop Beardy offered a very similar description of the work ahead.

"In order to move on, we have to work together nationally with Indigenous ministries and also the [broader] Anglican Church of Canada, so we can walk together in providing ministry, loving our people and feeding our people the Word, the Scriptures." Beardy said that his region is therefore trying to follow along with General Synod and the provincial synod—while also giving notice that they are now self-determining and have a plan for the next four to five years (somewhat set back, he says, by COVID-19).

Walking and learning together also means, for Beardy, working with people beyond the church. "Strategically, the church in the North is partnering with organizations and our political leaders," he said. "We work with them and also the many programs that agencies have. They call upon the church to provide spiritual leadership so we



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*—The Rt. Rev. Isaiah Larry Beardy, Indigenous suffragan bishop of the Northern Manitoba Area Mission of the Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh and assistant bishop in the diocese of Brandon and Missinipi Northern Saskatchewan in the diocese of Saskatchewan*

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

can promote holistic healing programs. They want us to help them out on the spiritual component of that healing [from colonialism] and development of our people.

“Because we live in the North together, we have to learn to work together,” Beardy added. “Indigenous communities, we do things collectively. Community is very important. That’s our priority. Also, at the same time, we help individuals on their journey in life.”

The planning work ahead, according to Cliff, should include efforts to break down assumptions between geographically disparate groups—recognizing that northern Anglicans might feel accustomed to drawing the short lot.

“The reality is that when you’ve lived on the edges, in the liminal spaces of the church ... you get used to being discounted or ignored,” Cliff explained.

“I want to do away with as many assumptions as possible about the North, and let people understand and see who the people of the North really are.”

“There has to be relationships of trust,” Hawkins told me. “If people feel as if their back is at the wall or there’s a subplot to any plan, it will doom us. Building that kind of relationship is key, and it’s the right time to do it. We have spent a lot of time and focus on things we disagree about—and spent a lot of energy and done some hurt to each other and the church’s reputation in that process. I think it is time to gather us all around—but top-down is not going to work nationally, provincially or at the diocesan level.”

Gathering around, Hawkins said, includes “learning again to deal with each other with some kind of real gentleness and respect. I think it means rebuilding relationships and connections across all kinds of divides—whether they’re the sort of political or theological issues of the day, or historical differences, or the dreadful betrayals, the terrible things that have been done to Indigenous people across the country by the church and in the church. The process will not work unless we can

build a stronger web of relationships.”

“What I want the strategic planning group to know,” Wheeler-Dame said, “is that the North needs the South just as much as the South needs the North. We are the whole church, the whole body.”

Wheeler-Dame said she received two pieces of advice that she has put to use in the North, both in planning processes and daily operations. “The first was given to me by a bishop 23 years ago. That advice was ‘just love the people.’ The second piece of advice was given by Mark MacDonald in 2017 at the national consultation regarding formation. That advice has been a mainstay, a reality of the fabric of life for Indigenous peoples and has been used by the church in the North. That advice is: ‘Listen to the elders.’”

These two pieces of advice go hand-in-hand with building up the church, the bishop said. “We might believe that the way the elders did things doesn’t work anymore. But there were reasons why the elders did things the way they did them.” It’s this reasoning, she explained, to which people should lend their ears.

“The South will benefit from the North if it heeds those two pieces of advice. The North definitely will benefit from being a part of the planning process, because we can get stuck in our ways and methods, as does the South.”

## Lessons and precedents

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This concept of listening to the elders—or considering what has already worked or is working in the North—was echoed in my other conversations when I asked the four bishops what southern churches might learn from the North.

Cliff said that he believes that northern churches have something to offer urban and suburban churches, given their experience with living on less. We spent some time discussing how churches in the North were planted—that many were established by Indigenous catechists like Henry Budd—and the ways in which Northern churches have managed to thrive without ever having been churches of the establishment.

One of the possible lessons from the North that Cliff cited was the way in which lay readers supplement the work of clergy instead of serving as supply during vacations.

“In the diocese of Brandon, lay readers were

divided into three groups: those that help with worship services; those that also have extra training in parish administration and preaching; and lay readers who are trained catechists who might be working for theological training beyond a lay certificate,” Cliff said. “People inhabit those places in the structure of lay readers based on what their personal comfort is, and what their discipleship-mission is. I think it’s possible to be a lay disciple for Jesus and have a gift for preaching, and taking some of the load off local clergy—and not be the thing that is *this is just the fill-in for the real stuff*.”

The presence of “intelligent, theologically developed, thoughtful catechist laity who lead Bible studies, lead small groups, shepherd souls in the way that laity can shepherd souls,” Cliff said, frees up clergy to pursue discipleship work that is geared toward their order. These efforts built on the existing culture around lay readership he found in the diocese.

Beardy also spoke of history and of strategic moves that were already happening in the North. “History tells us the missionaries came and brought the gospel. Our people accepted the gospel because traditional spirituality that was being practiced was telling the same thing ... love your neighbour, love everybody,” he said.

“Looking at the history of my people, that’s what our elders taught us. And we didn’t have clergy. I remember as early as 1900, in my community, there was no clergy. I think it was like that all over the North. Our elders basically carried on the ministry as catechists. They carried on the ministry. They did the church services. They provided that ministry in the life of the community.”

Since the community itself was responsible for the continuation of ministry, communities became rooted in faith, Beardy explained. “When I talk about the church, I’m talking about in many communities, the church is the community. It’s not a congregation on Bloor Street. It’s a faith community and the centre of that community is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

As the northern church developed, it was less tied to buildings. Beardy said elders prayed morning and evening in their tents, singing at noontime. “Sundays you rest on the land, roasting a moose hindquarter and eating that all day and saying prayers all day. That’s how life was on the land. So those kinds of practices carry on, and a lot of our communities had visiting missionaries and they left—and the elders carried on.”



PHOTO: KYLE SORKNESS ON FLICKR

**Better internet connections, Beardy says, would mean a greater church presence in northern fly-in communities, some of which can only really receive in-person visits once a year due to expense.**

“The strategic plan is to move towards that, to train local leaders in the community to carry on the ministry.”

Another element of strategy that Beardy discussed with me—and one that may vary substantially from expectations held by southern Canadian Anglicans—involves the church’s direct role in seeking federal funding and infrastructure improvements.

The bishop told me about an emerging sense that the federal government should be providing funding for ministry in the North—based upon the precedent from a bleak chapter of Canadian history. Day schools (one of which Beardy’s father attended) were said to be funded by the church—but in reality, and according to records he’s reviewed, “that history is distorted” and the church really operated as a destination for federal funds. “The federal governments paid the dioceses for these services,” he said. But if the government provided funds to the church to suppress the culture and spirituality of Indigenous peoples, perhaps it could provide funds to the church for healing and ministry.

“This question has to be asked to the federal government, because it’s serious, because all of us know the federal government has fiduciary responsibility for Indigenous people in Canada. The federal government, through the Indian trust money, must provide spiritual services for all the Indigenous communities across Canada,” Beardy said, adding that he hopes the church will help lead that conversation with the government.

“It’s up to the government to get on the bandwagon on reconciliation, eh? We need to work together. The government has been making great strides on this for many years,” the bishop said, citing substantial improvements in the education of Indigenous people by Indigenous people since the ’70s. “I think there are precedents already set, in place, that we can look at as part of our strategic plan.”

Likewise, Beardy suggested the church should be directly advocating for greater internet access in the North—a need that has become especially apparent since the onset of COVID-19. “Internet services are already identified as a need right across Canada—not only in Indigenous communities, but also in rural Canada.” This could also reduce pressures around church building expenses, he suggested, since it provides a form of communication in which a building is not required. He said Bell Canada is currently installing better



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*—Lesley Wheeler-Dame, bishop of the diocese of Yukon*

infrastructure in Northern Manitoba, and that the church could both call for more infrastructure improvements and provide training.

Such advocacy would also mean a greater church presence in fly-in communities like Shamattawa, which can only really receive in-person visits once a year due to expense. “We still have to connect to that community through a proper [internet] infrastructure. We can have confirmation classes on Zoom. We can have training for lay readers on Zoom, even for clergy. Places like Henry Budd College are doing that already. They’re using technology to reach out, to do some diploma programs with people who are interested in going onto ordination, or just to learn the Bible. Those kinds of things need to be included in the strategy that we’re talking about.”

Cliff also cited infrastructure concerns—noting that people in the North are accustomed to seeing slow (and sometimes no) progress on promised improvements. Wheeler-Dame said the patience of Northern peoples, especially around delayed change and limited resources, is a strength that can be learned from.

“The North does not have it all together, but the North has more patience to wait for the answers. The North has learned, and is still learning, to be adaptable and to make use of what it does have rather than trying to force its resources into being something they were not intended to be,” she said.

“We make do with what is available and instead adjust our own expectations. During this pandemic, for example, in our diocese, we have had to learn about making use of technology. Anyone looking on from the South would have a good laugh at our awkwardness. ‘Why haven’t

we made use of it before now?’ Because it was certainly available in small ways.”

The answer, Wheeler-Dame said, lies in the complexity tied to technology in the North: overage fees, limited bandwidth, slow connections, lack of infrastructure and the high cost of IT support and training. “So the body of Christ might learn patience; awareness of existing abundance of resources; how to become more adaptable and willing to adjust expectations; and to ask if the expectations we have are even realistic.”

The bishop emphasized, however, that she believes both North and South in Canada have much to learn from one another—together, not apart. “I think that the North, in terms of strategic planning, needs to be listening to the South as well. I think that strategic planning for all of us must be recognizing that we can’t always separate ourselves. That each has good practices, and each has practices that don’t work so well. So we need to be able to ask each other, ‘How do you do this?’ and look at [whether to] adapt that way or that method into our current reality.”

She added, “I think the only thing we can say that the whole church should be doing is being the whole church, and not separating.”

Hawkins also cautioned against assuming that growth among northern churches offers a lesson for the South.

“In the face of the general decline that we have been experiencing for many years, anyone that is not declining as much as others can be filled with a self-righteousness that is destructive to their soul but also makes them unhelpful to others. The context in many of our northern communities is very, very different. The idea that some things that appear to be working numerically could just

be reduplicated—that everyone [should do] what we did in those places where we have real growth—is mistaken.”

Like Wheeler-Dame, Hawkins pointed towards being the whole church—especially through greater exchange. “We need to do things in confidence and hope and humility when the final structure and shape of it is not always clear. That requires trust,” he said. “It requires trust both in God and in God’s direction. But also trust between people.”

Building that trust, Hawkins said again, involves moving beyond that “neutral space” of General Synod—the wrestling ring he mentioned. “The experience of hospitality, I don’t think we emphasize it enough in the church. The experience of cross-cultural worship and fellowship is a profound thing,” he said. “I might say things to you at General Synod that I would never say to you as a guest at my dining room table. Ever. Never, ever.”

For his part, integrating more hospitality into decision-making processes involves recognizing that the Northern church is on Indigenous land.

“An abiding respect for the people of the land—which is a biblical term—is required, which requires a kind of humility as well, on our part. I also think it’s all about relationships: we need to grow relationships in which we know each other better but also trust each other more. The governance working group has done some remarkable work for and with ACIP and other groups over the years.” When that has been particularly successful, he said, it has been undergirded by trust and mutual support.

Hawkins said that one of the great downsides of COVID-19 has been the reduction in face-to-face meetings—meaning fewer opportunities for people to learn about each other and their contexts. Prior to the pandemic, the bishop worked to support people from elsewhere in Canada coming to Saskatchewan.

“One of the things people say (God bless them) is, ‘What books should we read before we come?’ I say, ‘None. You need to come with an open mind and heart, with an openness and a desire to appreciate.’ And not even understand—because a desire to understand people can be a desire to ‘figure them out,’ which never ends well.”

Hawkins said these trips have been successful at building an appreciation between people of such different backgrounds. “It’s just one small thing, but they

come.” The bishop added that a web of interpersonal relationships can help keep the church and the wider communion vital as formal structures become more strained.

Wheeler-Dame shared a similar thought on structures and the purpose and relevance of the church. “Certainly, COVID-19 has shown us that what we are doing does not work. I think we have far too much focus on structure and not enough focus on the message and the reason that we exist. The reason we exist is to live out the Great Commission.” The commission, she said, “has to do with what is the reality to which we have been called. I do think we always have to be doing strategic planning, it has to be an ongoing process. But let’s not just do strategic planning for the sake of strategic planning.”

Since moving to a diocese with a presence in the North, Cliff says he has become keen to ensure that planning yields positive results for the people there. “My experience of the faithfulness of northern peoples has changed me,” he said. “I have an understanding of—after four and a half years of living with and working with and admiring people of the North in my diocese—their resilience and their patience and their work attitude.”

Beardy, in my conversation with him, offered a reminder of that resilience that can be found among challenging conditions in the North, as people work together to face hardship.

“A lot of our people are dying. One-third of our population, on average in Northern Manitoba, has chronic illness. So we have people who have heart attacks, people are dying of cancer, complications from diabetes,” Beardy said. “Where in the past we used to have a funeral twice a year, now it seems like we have a funeral two or three times a month.”

Such challenges demonstrate the care and love offered by local non-stipendiary clergy, lay leaders, community elders and choirs. “They put a lot of work in funerals,” he said.

Regardless of the challenges and the limitations, he said, the church moves forward.

“The church in the North lives out its life as a Christian community. That’s our life. We live it day to day, and we breathe it, we eat it, we smell it. And we don’t respond to it just on Sundays. It’s our daily life. Whether we have financial resources, we have to try to live it out to the best of our ability.” ■