

A Presentation to the
Struggling and Rural Parish Task Force
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Ministry to Rural Missions and Parishes: A Historical Perspective

Reverend Doctor Ross N. Hebb

Introduction

The report of the Parish Development and Support Team presented at the 2007 Diocesan synod contains the following assertion regarding the 2005 Synod motion entitled **Support for Rural Parishes**; “This motion, (that the Diocesan synod re-affirm its historic commitment to rural communities) has proven to be the most challenging, and yet arguably *the single most important item* that is being addressed by our team and Diocesan Council at the current time.” The Team’s Report proceeded to observe that “Under Bishop William Hockin’s leadership a direction was developed to address the changing demographics within the Diocese. The direction was the rationalization and consolidation of parishes and the requirement of parishes to be financially self-supporting. In other words, if a parish could not meet its financial obligations then it might not continue with its ministry in its historic manner. Such a direction appeared to be contrary to the motion passed at the 2005 Synod pledging support for rural parishes. Many people appeared to view ‘support’ to mean financial support.”¹

This presentation will ask the overarching question; why the radical change in attitude towards the majority (rural) of parishes in our diocese? In essence, why have we adopted a ‘no money / no ministry’ policy? This will be done within the context of the reality that the colony, and then the province, has always possessed a constantly shifting demographic throughout its over 200 year history. Yet, in spite of this situation, the church has always sought out and ministered to the Lord’s scattered flock whenever and wherever a need existed. This paper will explain this by unequivocally establishing what has been the missionary attitude and behavior (policy) of the Church towards rural New Brunswick since the Gospel first arrived on these shores.

The Early (Pre-Loyalist) Period

In 1769 the Rev Thomas Wood, Church of England (Anglican) missionary based in Annapolis Nova Scotia undertook a tour of the Saint John river valley. Wood’s ministrations extended to the local aboriginal population, who although Roman Catholic, willingly partook of worship conducted by Wood in their native tongue. Rev Wood also preached to “more than 200, mostly Dissenters” at Maugerville.² Wood’s summer tour illustrates a number of foundational and important principles. First, although there were no churches, parishes and hardly any communities, the Church expressed its interest and concern for the people of pre-Loyalist New Brunswick by sending a missionary priest to offer and perform ministry. There were no ‘pockets’ of churchmen and no one asked for ministry but the Church reached out and went to the scattered communities in the wilderness. Rev Wood, while not belonging to the territory, nonetheless

¹ http://anglican.nb.ca/synod/2007/journal/E_diocesan_council.pdf pgs 27 - 28.

² PANB F 9994 Journal 18, Wood to SPG 14 Nov 1769.

traveled and ministered there. It must also be noted that his ministry was accepted - by aboriginals who were Roman Catholic and by New England Planters who were Congregationalist (United Church). As for Wood's financial support, he was a missionary of the English Church's quasi-official missionary organization, the SPG (The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts) The SPG was founded in 1701 and was supported almost exclusively by donations and bequests of ordinary citizens in England. The Society (SPG) was decidedly NOT an organ of the British government and had often been at odds with government policy and critical of its decisions. This was especially true of the SPG's long campaign to secure a bishop for the 13 Colonies and over the British government's turning a blind-eye at Colonial Settlers' treatment of the aboriginal population.

The Loyalist Period: 1783- 1825

In 1783-1785, the Loyalists arrived in New Brunswick. Although politically loyal to the crown, the vast majority of Loyalists were not members of the Church of England. At the very most 20% may have had Church affiliation.³ Not a single community, except Kingston, could boast that churchmen comprised the majority of the local population. Despite this fact, the only active clergy of any denomination amongst the 10,000 refugees were a few Anglican priests from New England. One such man was the Rev John Sayre who died at Maugerville in 1784 from a disease contracted ministering to the huddled refugees at Saint John the previous autumn. The Rev John Beardsley, an early arrival in 1783, ministered alone most of the following two years traveling up and down the Saint John river valley and out to Kingston. He married, baptized, counseled and buried every Christian, of whatever denomination, who desired his ministry.⁴ All the people were in wretched circumstances and could afford to pay him nothing. Beardsley's only source of income was his stipend from the SPG in London, England.

The practice of ministry to the scattered and the impoverished was not peculiar to a few clergy like Rev Beardsley or Sayre or limited to the SPG's generosity but it also became a matter of government policy. After decades of ignoring the advise of resident missionaries in the 13 Colonies as well as the SPG at home and as a result of the sobering loss of the American Revolutionary War, the British Government finally decided to support the SPG's missionary initiative. It must be stressed that this change was a matter of the Government adopting the SPG's advise and not a matter of the Church being co-opted as an arm of the secular government.⁵ Thus the 1784 Instructions to Governor Carleton of New Brunswick directed him to divide the new colony into parishes and reserve lands in each area for the support of a resident cleric and a schoolmaster.⁶ The government realized that the colonists could not possibly support

³ R. N. Hebb, *The Church of England in Loyalist New Brunswick; 1783-1825*, (FDU Press, Cranbury, N.J., 2004), 42.

⁴ PANB F 10005 Beardsley to SPG, 26 April 1784 & 20 July 1784.

⁵ Peter Doll, *Revolution, Religion and National Identity*, 29-31.

⁶ Hebb, 163.

their own clergy or schoolmasters. However, given the importance of worship and education, provision had to be made from the outset. It was realized that provision had to be made, at a higher administrative level, for the creation of parishes, for the placement and support of clergy and for the placement and maintenance of schoolmasters. It was also acknowledged that the support established had to be ongoing, that is, for the indefinite future. Hence the allotment of lands for perpetual support. At this juncture, the British government also contributed funds to 'top-up' clerical salaries and to provide monies for both church and parsonage construction. Interestingly, the salary assistance was given by the government to the SPG for the missionary society to administer. It was not administered by the government.

This provides a thumbnail sketch of the conditions which persisted throughout the Loyalist era. Clergy and schoolmasters were financially supported by the SPG in England - the schoolmaster entirely so. It must also be noted that SPG sponsored schools were, throughout the colony, usually the only schools available - and they were free for the students! Sadly, the funds for church and parsonage construction proved wholly inadequate. Not one church building or parsonage was completed with these funds and it appears that all the funds were used up for church construction and not a penny made its way towards erecting a single parsonage. Missionaries Richard Clarke in Gagetown and James Scovil in Kingston had to construct their own homes at their own expense.

Despite the personal discouragements to the clergy of inadequate infrastructure provision, ministry throughout the colony continued. The original eight clergy, although in their fifties when they arrived, ministered faithfully until their deaths. This ministry included regular circuit traveling when the weather permitted and their health held. A shortage of new candidates for the ministry hampered desired expansion in ministry and missions until about 1820. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars sufficient stability ensued that a tide of clergy from the old country began to arrive in New Brunswick. One such cleric was Rev James Somerville, a native of Scotland, who arrived at Fredericton in 1817. Serving what he called the three vacant parishes in the Fredericton region, namely St Mary's, Queensborough and Kingsclear, he recorded the extent of the area they encompassed as 40 miles, 110 miles and 18 miles respectively. Of the three, in 1819, only Queensborough had a partially finished church building, the other two had none. Somerville regularly travelled 18 miles each way to conduct services. In 1821 he reported that the church at St Mary's was almost finished and that his congregations were increasing. While the Bishop of Nova Scotia relieved him of the cure of Queensborough in 1826 there was still no church at Kingsclear. In 1828 Somerville complained to the SPG that his health was suffering due to the rigours of the New Brunswick climate. In 1836 he applied to the SPG to be accepted for a retirement allowance because of advancing age and progressively poor health. In 1839 he returned to Scotland due to a sudden loss of health and died a few years later.⁷ Somerville thus entered the long list of men who spent their working lives, their limited resources and their health ministering to the scattered communities of faithful in New Brunswick. There were many who followed in his footsteps. That these scattered pockets of faithful had to be able to pay for his ministrations was a thought which would never had crossed his mind.

⁷ Palgrave Index, 136, NBM, Mrs Somerville, 5 Dec. 1839.

The Post-Loyalist, Pre-Medley Era: 1820-1845

While throughout the Loyalist era there were never more than ten clergy in the colony at a time, by 1820 the number had risen slightly to fourteen and then to twenty-six in 1829. In the early 1830s the church in the colony faced a crisis. Ever shifting demographics, persistent poverty and inflation meant that the clergy depended almost entirely on their SPG stipend for their existence. Political changes in Great Britain meant that the government was moving to reduce and then eliminate their share of clerical pay. The effect of this would have meant a 50% reduction in clerical stipends. This crisis necessitated the SPG placing a freeze on the creation of new missions in 1831 - a drastic move which ran contrary to their entire world view and established practice. The establishment of new missions, the support of clergy and the expansion of the Church had always been their *raison d'être*. Whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself, the Church responded. Expansion, mission and ministry, that is, the spread of the Gospel, was always the goal.

When government withdrawal of aid to the SPG in support of clerical stipends did arrive in 1832, the Church in New Brunswick did not remain idle. It acted. At Bishop John Inglis' suggestion, in the autumn of 1836, Archdeacon Coster chaired a meeting in Fredericton of what was to become the **Diocesan Church Society**, (DCS). In the bishop's letter he stressed that the new organization was to have as one of its main goals "aid to Missions in the most neglected places."⁸ Inglis spoke of "defraying the actual expense of visits from neighbouring Missionaries to destitute settlements - but if the means be found, the employment of a visiting Missionary would be a happy achievement."⁹ The DCS was formed in 1837. Its business was conducted by an Annual Meeting held each February in Fredericton. Each mission was to have local committees of the Society which, as well as raising funds in each mission, were empowered to elect two lay members to accompany the missionary to the annual meeting at Fredericton. Great emphasis was laid on the fact that the Society was to be as broad-based as possible. The Society's Constitution stated that "the payment annually of any sum, however small, do constitute the person paying the same a member of the Society." Annual Reports published for the ensuing sixty years show the effectiveness of this policy. Names and amounts were published, not in an effort to shame people into giving more but to reflect their sacrificial contributions. The widow's mite appears time and again in the list of names.

The specific objects of this unique Society, the first like it in the entire British Empire, are worthy of full quotation. The very first object was "Missionary visits to neglected places." Next came "scholarships for students at King's College, Fredericton, aid to Schools and Sunday schools "in which Church principles are taught, and encouraging of schoolmasters and

⁸ Bishop John Inglis to Archdeacon Coster 1 June 1836 *Abstract of the Proceedings of the Church Society of the Archdeaconry of New Brunswick*, (Lewis W Durant, Saint John, 1837), 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

catechists,”¹⁰ the supplying of tracts and books “in strict conformity with the principles of the Established Church”¹¹ and “aid to the building and enlarging of churches and chapels.” Two points of particular note arise from the DCS’s constitution as ratified at its first general meeting at Fredericton in February of 1837. First, the entire effort was geared to increase and make more effective support for the church at the local mission (parish) level. This statement however does not fully encapsulate the evangelical and truly missionary spirit of the enterprise. The goal was to increase missionary activity - especially in the areas which could not afford it. The goal was to reach out to the scattered, the poor - to use their term - the neglected. Secondly, the stipulation that funds raised were to support the goals listed and “none other” is telling. The DCS, while seeking to increase the fiscal self-sufficiency of the Church in the Colony, was not created to aid the support of the salaries of the clergy already in missions. The sole goal was to increase mission and ministry in places which did not as yet enjoy the clergy’s services.

The Era of Bishop John Medley: 1845- 1892

At the time of Bishop Medley’s arrival in June 1845 there were twenty-four separate missions / parishes of the Church of England in New Brunswick¹² and forty-seven church buildings.¹³ The clerical force numbered thirty¹⁴ - the parishes of Saint John, Fredericton, Saint Andrews and St Stephen all having the services of a curate and the Miramichi river valley overworking the three heroic clerics stationed there. Sadly, according to Medley in 1845, fully twelve missions lacked Sunday services.¹⁵ Fully ten of these new missions had been established in the period immediately following Bishop Charles Inglis death during the non-resident episcopate of Bishop Stanser, namely in the years, 1816-1825. The remaining five parishes were established over the next twenty year period, between 1825-1845. As is well known, Bishop Medley’s episcopate saw an amazing expansion of missions, clergy and church buildings. One index of this expansion was the consecration of 107 new church buildings during the Medley episcopate. While the number of clergy increased to seventy (70) by 1871 Bishop Medley never felt he had a

¹⁰ Abstract of the Proceedings of the Church Society of the Archdeaconry of New Brunswick, (Lewis W Durant, Saint John, 1837), 25.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lee, *A Historical Sketch of the First Fifty Years of the Church of England in the Province of New Brunswick*, 139.

¹³ B. L. Craig, *Apostle to the Wilderness: Bishop John Medley and the Evolution of the Anglican Church*, (FDU Press, Cranbury NJ, 2005), 54.

¹⁴ E. Hawkins, *Annals of the Diocese of Fredericton*, 59.

¹⁵ John Medley, *A Statement Respecting the Conditions and Wants of His Diocese by the Bishop of Fredericton*, (London, J. Master, 1848), 2.

sufficient supply of hardy and qualified men.¹⁶

As is universally acknowledged, the Medley era was one in which the evangelical and missionary spirit of the Church of England in this diocese was at its height. The significant legacy of wooden neo-Gothic churches throughout the province is an enduring testament to this truth. The clergy travelled, the people prayed and worked, the Gospel was preached, the sacraments administered and the Church expanded and flourished. A few quotations from Medley himself will affirm the spirit of outreach, mission and evangelism which typified this period.

Already in his 1850 Charge, Medley could point to new missions, new clergy and increased DCS funds. However, he reminded his audience “pecuniary results are not progress ... this is to be measured not by collections of money, but by the well being of souls (and this) by Communicants, steady, holy, frequent communicants.”¹⁷ Obviously increased Communicants required houses of worship and resident clergy - the necessary pre-conditions to enable mission, ministry and faithfulness to transpire and grow.

Medley’s attitude towards rural parishes in particular is further evidenced by his words on the Church in America. While he traveled there often, was invited to preach and generally admired the Americans for their learning and zeal, he was not blind to particular shortcomings. In his 1853 Charge, along with praise, he noted, “there is a sad tale on the other side.” He pointed out that while the population of the United States was 25 million, there were scarcely one million churchmen. “In the city of New York we find learned clergymen and stately churches, but where are they to be found in the rural villages? Where are the clergy in such villages as Richibucto, Shediac, Musquash, Saint George, Saint David, or Grand Falls, in this province?” Rural New England was a wasteland for the Episcopal Church, the territory had been abandoned and there was no Anglican presence whatsoever. New Brunswick was an entirely different story. Missions and missionary work, had, since the establishment of the colony in 1784, started at home, in the colony itself and progress was continuing to be made. Medley pointed out the contrast, “the neighboring diocese of Maine numbers 548,000 souls. It has 13 clergy of the Episcopal church, and I should suppose not over 3000 churchmen. We have in this diocese 54 clergy and 10,000 churchmen and our population is less than 200,000.”¹⁸ In this comparison it was clear that New Brunswick Churchmen had indeed accomplished something. Moreover it was not just a matter of accomplishment but also of attitude. The Episcopal Church had, to Medley’s mind, abandoned all hope and missionary effort in rural New England. The area had been abandoned to non-conformity, fundamentalism, universalism and Unitarianism.

While we could mine Bishop Medley’s recorded legacy indefinitely to reinforce the point being made in this paper, the following excerpt is surely amazing. In his 1859 Charge, Medley

¹⁶ Craig, *Apostle*, 70.

¹⁷ *A Charge delivered in the Cathedral of Christ Church Fredericton to the clergy of the diocese assembled at the second triennial visitation of John, Bishop of Fredericton*, (Saint John, N.B. W. I Avery, 1850), 43

¹⁸ *A Charge to the Clergy of the Diocese by John, Bishop of Fredericton, holden in Christ Church Cathedral, Fredericton*, (Fredericton, J . Simpson, 1853), 20.

addressed the issue of struggling rural parishes directly and wrote passionately at to what was at stake. Medley reminded “all churchmen (to) consider what must follow the abandonment of any mission, if even a poor country mission.” In his moving analysis he observed: “The church is closed. The parsonage is shut up. The usual regular round of services and sacraments is discontinued. The Sunday School no longer assemblies under the approving eye, and cheerful superintendence of its proper guide. The inspired word is no longer publically read. Irregular habits are formed. Prayer is neglected and the young begin to pass the Lord’s Day in listless idleness and dissipation; or if more serious, they often join another communion. Children die without baptism. Sufferers linger on in pining sickness, longing for the well-known footstep and familiar voice of their pastor, but no one comes to read and pray, and console them. Or if a visit is paid, a new system is to be learned, the Prayer Book is laid aside as useless, their baptism is disallowed, their whole mind is disquieted, and being assured that their life has been all wrong, and their convictions of truth an entire delusion, trembling on the verge of eternity, they renounce their baptism, swallow with credulity a new faith, wild with fear and excitement, and turn their backs on all that they have held dear in religion. Meanwhile, the Church or churches, to which they have all contributed, which the Societies at home have liberally aided, to which the parishioners have pointed with pleasure and with pride, as the fruit of their labours, fall into decay; the parsonage is occupied by others, the whole parish is a moral ruin.”¹⁹ Such is the summation of our first resident bishop as to what is at stake. Surely these words from our collective past are cause of pause and deep reflection.

Conclusion

Several points to consider in summation.

I. In their book, *Preaching and Worship in the Small Church*, William Willimon and Robert Wilson point to a bias against small churches. Small churches, lacking the resources in both people and money, cannot and do not offer programs as larger churches can. Small churches focus primarily on worship. Sunday worship and perhaps a small Sunday School and maybe an aging ACW group is all they have. In our work-oriented society this seems insufficient and worship alone appears to be time wasted. As they write, “Time spent in worship tends to be thought of as idle time - unused time.”²⁰ Needless to say, as outlined above, our heritage disagrees. Is it possible that small, rural and struggling parishes who focus on worship have something to offer the broader church? A mission to the world of *big*, the world of work and stress? A prophetic reminder to the big, the ‘action’ oriented Church? And perhaps small churches even have a mission to the broader culture in which we live?

¹⁹ *A Charge delivered in the Cathedral, Fredericton, on Thursday, September 1, 1859, to the Clergy of the Diocese and published at their Request, by John, Bishop of Fredericton*, (Saint John, Barnes and Co., 1859), 23.

²⁰ William H. Willimon and Robert L. Wilson, *Preaching and Worship in the Small Church* (Eugene, OR, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001; reprint of Abingdon, 1980), 39-40.

II. A visitor to the village of Stanley today will experience a small, scenic and historically notable rural New Brunswick community. They will also notice publically run schools and recently paved streets. The village of Stanley has a population of barely 300 souls. The local tax base cannot provide the funds for paving their streets, let alone running the school system. How then can Stanley enjoy these amenities? The answer is simple. They are part of a larger whole. The larger entity is the Province of New Brunswick. The Department of Highways does not ask, ‘Can the people of Stanley pay for paving their streets?’ before it is done. Rather, the Department treats the people of Stanley, as far as paving is concerned, as fellow New Brunswickers and provides them with paved streets. The Department of Education does not ask, “Can the people of Stanley and surrounding area, pay for the school buildings, the busing costs and all the teacher and support staff salaries?” before they open the school next Monday? Obviously not. As the good folks of Stanley, and every other small community of New Brunswick, share the benefits of belonging to New Brunswick, should not the Anglican Church extend similar benefits of belonging to rural and struggling Anglicans? Indeed, is it not *especially* the Church’s call to seek and save the small, the neglected, the marginalized? Is it not what has always been done by the Church in this Province? Is such not the proven legacy of Rev Wood, Rev Beardsley, the DCS and Bishop Medley?

III Finally, is it not time to re-assess the trend of “rationalization and consolidation of parishes?” Is it not time to recover the Gospel imperative of mission and ministry to people where they are at - including rural New Brunswick? Is it not time to dispense with the mind-set that the Gospel is a commodity, that it is to be ministered only to those who can pay? Is it not time to fully recover a Gospel message *and practice* where Christ’s grace is free, God’s love is unmerited and every Anglican, wherever they live in our Diocese, is a Child of the Spirit?