

Pastoral Letter from The Rev. Geoff Howson



20 January 2016

Dear Friends,

After discussion at the parish council, a decision was made by the wardens and myself to support a pilot project for the open table (a dinner for the needy and homeless from Monday to Friday). This decision has generated much controversy over the past two months. Controversy is a disagreement or debate and we in the parish have been living out this reality in a heightened state during these past few months.

There is much debate around how decisions are made at All Saints (governance). The ultimate decisions are made by the corporation (the wardens along with the parish priest) but whilst I have been with you the practice has been to involve the parish council (advisory board) in a collaborative manner. Decisions have been made without a special vestry when there was a substantial consensus at the parish council. One of my desires is that we are able to arrive at decisions using consensus instead of the straight up and down vote since this allows for conversations and listening. Whilst it is messy I believe in the end it allows for reflective decision making where even when the discussion is heated there is space for people to be heard.

There are times when we have to call a special vestry due to canonical guidelines (e.g. the selling of the rectory, major lease agreements or arrangements with an outside party (the renovation of the terraces in co-operation with the City of Peterborough). During the last few years we have had a fair number of these vestries due to the transitions that have been occurring here at All Saints and in the wider Peterborough Anglican-Lutheran community (e.g. the amalgamation with St Alban's).

An example where we called a special vestry at the discretion of the corporation and parish council was

around the warming room when we were asked to provide overnight shelter for the homeless. The wardens and council felt that town hall meetings were important for the general good of the parish since this major undertaking did involve other stakeholders who rented the hall in the evenings. After careful consultation we all agreed to move forward on this mission.

When asked to renew this ministry the parish council was not of one mind on the matter. The wardens and myself with the collaboration of the council agreed that a special vestry needed to be held. There was much debate amongst the congregation. As the priest I felt I would recommend a 2/3rds majority for the project to be renewed. (This is a practice our Anglican church has used around contentious issues such as the blessing of same sex blessings {the Diocese of New Westminster}).

People have stated that the decision around the open table was flawed and we should have called a special vestry. The reasons why that did not happen was a) there was overwhelming support from the council after two months of conversation, b) the open table was not seen to cause major disruption to the tenants of the hall nor any loss of income, c) the time that people coming in for the meals would last roughly ninety minutes, d) it was seen from the All Saints leadership as primarily a rental of the parish hall from 2.00pm to 6.00pm. It was for these reasons that the council, wardens and I felt no need to call a special vestry.

On a personal note, I am truly sorry that this pilot project has created the controversy that has arisen. If any of you do want to talk with me and share your concerns please be assured I am available. Many of you have and I appreciate your passion and concerns.

Conflict is a reality in every church. The task of pastoral leadership is not to eradicate every conflict in the church, but to help people resolve the conflicts in a way that honours Christ, protects the people, and manifests love within the congregation. I trust we are growing into such a congregation. It is not easy but my commitment to you is to provide that leadership

Blessings on our journey together

Fr Geoff
