

THE REV. GERALD W. KEUCHER REPORT

submitted to
The Bishop of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands
and to the Leadership of the Diocese

by
The Rev. Gerald W. Keucher
One Pendleton Place
Staten Island NY 10301-1220 USA
347-713-2218; jerrykeucher@gmail.com

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Background

I was invited by the Rt. Rev. Howard Gregory, Bishop of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, to visit Jamaica and to make recommendations on various challenges facing the Anglican Church here.

I asked that a number of meetings be arranged so I could hear the concerns and thoughts of as many clergy and laity as possible. Over a period of five days I was present at:

- ❖ two joint meetings of the Diocesan Council and the Diocesan Financial Board;
- ❖ three regional meetings of clergy and laity in Kingston, Montego Bay, and Santa Cruz, each followed by a meeting with the clergy; and
- ❖ meetings with representatives of four cures, one in the Montego Bay Region, one in the Mandeville Region, and two in the Kingston Region.

In addition, I had meetings and conversations with Bishop Gregory, the Rt. Rev. Robert Thompson, Suffragan Bishop of Kingston, the Rt. Rev. Leon Golding, Suffragan Bishop of Montego Bay, the Rev. Canon Denzil Barnes, Diocesan Secretary, and Mr. Michael Fennell, Chair of the Diocesan Financial Board.

Before continuing, I want to express my sincere appreciation to the Bishops, Canon Barnes and Mr. Fennell for their indefatigable labors in making sure I arrived at each of these engagements, and for their time and kindnesses. And I am most grateful to the many clergy and laity who attended all the meetings held during the week, some attending more than one. I have encountered only warmth and hospitality. Everyone has been open, responsive, and obviously dedicated to the Anglican Church and its mission. I found a deep love of God and His Son and a passionate devotion to the mission the Christ has entrusted to the members of His Risen Body the Church. Thank you all.

*May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us; *
prosper the work of our hands;
prosper our handiwork.*

– Psalm 90:17

The Challenges

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD,
plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future
with hope.*

– Jer. 29:11

Chronic diocesan budget deficits

The Diocese faces a short-term cash crisis. The stipends of the parish clergy are paid from the diocesan budget, which depends on assessments from congregations for 85% of its income. For a number of years, these assessments have not been paid in full. Since almost two-thirds of budgeted expenses relate to compensating the parish clergy, Church House has not been able to cut expenses by reducing or eliminating clergy compensation payments.

The chronic deficits have been funded by borrowing funds from the Sustentation Reserve (SR) funds, amounts the congregations have deposited with Church House. Normally these funds would earn interest from banks where the funds were invested or from building loans made to congregations. As Church House has borrowed and spent these funds to support the diocesan budget, the diocesan finance office has continued to credit each of the accounts in the SR funds with the interest due them.

The total borrowed from the SR funds over the years is more than J\$200,000,000. The borrowing cannot continue.

Number of congregations

Church House estimates that there are about 30,000 to 35,000 active members of the congregations of the Diocese, a considerable decline from a few decades ago. There are about 300 churches, missions and chapels of ease. The number of buildings maintained has not declined, and so building maintenance has become a burden too heavy to bear for numerous congregations. There is a widespread sense that a number of congregations should be closed and that others should be merged and others should be made part of a multi-point cure under the leadership of one priest.

Lack of Unity

In every meeting and in almost all the individual conversations I have had, people have expressed that there is currently a lack of unity of purpose, and that Church House and the congregations are not on the same page, or even on the same team. There is a feeling at the diocesan level that the parish clergy are not giving a high enough priority to diocesan obligations,

and there is a perception among the clergy that diocesan mechanisms are onerous and punitive. One priest said that the diocesan financial machinery was like a vacuum cleaner sucking up every dollar.

And yet a longing for unity was expressed by everyone who said it did not exist at present. People at all levels want to feel that everyone is working toward a common purpose. There is, as I have said, a deep devotion to the Church and to its common life.

Observations

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, O Lord God, you know."
– Ez. 37:1–3

Anxiety versus Leadership

There is no doubt that the Diocese of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands is experiencing strong headwinds – economic, cultural, and social – and the financial problems the Diocese faces are a symptom of these larger trends. There are no fixes that can immediately cure these long-term difficulties. As the financial situation deteriorates, leaders have become more anxious. Anxiety freezes our thought patterns. Not only do we lose the ability to imagine how things can be different, but we also double down by continuing to do more strenuously and more anxiously the things that have not been working.

Anxiety is the opposite of leadership. Anxiety is about present concerns. Leadership is about the future. Leadership is

- ❖ taking the long view
- ❖ having a vision on the horizon and working toward it
- ❖ causing something to happen that would not happen in the normal course of events
- ❖ preparing to leave your successors an institution stronger than it was when you began to lead it.

The first step in turning around a system that is headed in the wrong direction is to imagine what a better future would look like and then taking incremental steps in that direction. These steps may be painful, but they must be taken if we are to take into account our largest constituency – the future members of the Anglican Diocese of Jamaica who have not yet been born.

Mutual accountability

From the time of the Emperor Constantine until living memory, the Church was part of the cultural, social, and often legal establishment. Before the

establishment took hold, St. Athanasius could write that “the Son of God became man so that we might become God.” A church of the establishment would be far more likely to say that “God became man so that we might become good.” Churches with an establishment mentality act as agents of social control. Such a church is more likely to urge faithful participation in the rites of the church and faithful obedience to its structures than to stress personal appropriation of the members’ experiences of God.

The Church in Jamaica is heir, not only to establishment, but also to colonialism. The legacy of both of these systems is likely to be a top-down, command and control model. In such a system accountability flows only upward. The mechanisms employed will tend to be experienced at the lower levels as coercive. The operative image of such a Church will be that of a pyramid. The language used in such a system will be the language both of obligation and paternalism. At many meetings I heard references to one or more occasions when the parish clergy had been compared to wayward children. The references made me think of the Loyalist Anglican priest Samuel Seabury, later the first U.S. bishop, who wrote just before the American Revolution that Great Britain was “a vigorous matron, just approaching a green old age; and with spirit and strength sufficient to chastise her undutiful and rebellious children.” I think in the Jamaican context such echoes of paternalism will carry an extra sting.

In a mutually accountable system, because accountability flows both directions, the language used will be the language of mutuality, not obligation. For example, every time anyone uses the term “diocesan assessment” the phrase emphasizes the power of the diocese to compel payment without specifying the purpose of the tax being required. To call the assessment the “ministry share” would de-emphasize the coercive aspects and call attention to the purpose for which the resources would be used.

The image of a mutually accountable Church would be more like Jesus’ image of the vine. The Church in Jamaica is a branch of Jesus’ great vine. Church House is the stem connecting all the leaves. The stem needs what the leaves produce as much as the leaves need the nutrients that come from the roots through the stem.

Because of its system of equalizing clergy compensation, the Church in Jamaica is in my opinion a living example of mutuality in a way that dioceses in the U.S., where clergy are paid locally, are not. You really do know what St. Paul meant by “the matter of giving and receiving” (*Phil. 4:15*). There is a great story of mutual accountability to tell here; we just need to find the appropriate language in which to tell it.

The work of turning a post-establishment, post-colonial top-down institution into a mutually accountable, non-coercive network is a very complex task. Over and over leaders will find the language of obligation springing to their lips and will have to recast what they want to say in the language of mutual

desire. Probably every mechanism and procedure currently in use will be found to embody in some way the old, coercive assumptions. I would hope that the diocesan leadership will be alert to seeing these unhelpful aspects of the ways things are now done and will think creatively about how things could be done differently. As parish clergy and laity offer their observations about the mechanisms and procedures, the leadership will need to be open to hearing and acting on those comments.

The Church in Jamaica is, as is the Church everywhere, an institution, and institutions are inherently hierarchical. However, in our context today, I am convinced that in all parts of the institution, if we wish to be effective and to build mutual trust, we must constantly struggle against the hierarchical tendencies and remember that “coercion has no place in the character of God.” (*Epistle to Diognetus*, 7) In this work a single careless word or a high-handed, unaccountable action can undo a great deal of conscientious work.

Recommendations

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them. — Isa 42:16

Here follow some suggestions and recommendations for dealing with the challenges outlined at the beginning of this report in the light of the observations I have made above.

1. **The diocesan budget** – I have recommended to the Diocesan Council and the Diocesan Financial Board that the chronic deficits must be stopped over the period of a few years. While I firmly believe that the long-term solution to a budget problem is always found on the income side, in the short-term, when the situation is unsustainable, reductions may need to be made on the expense side.

I encourage the diocesan leadership to reduce the deficit by J\$5,000,000 to J\$10,000,000 every year until the budget is no longer borrowing from the SR funds. The cuts that will need to be made will no doubt be painful and difficult, but exercising the discipline required to do this will have several beneficial effects beyond slowing and then stopping the hemorrhaging.

First, by announcing this plan and by following through on it, the diocesan leadership will be exercising leadership. They will be charting a new course, turning the system from a road that leads to a dead-end to a path toward a sustainable future.

Second, the diocesan leadership will be modeling good leadership. Right now there is a perception that leaders are enjoining austerity on congregations but are not participating in the pain of austerity. This will demonstrate that diocesan leaders are not asking congregations to do anything that they are not willing to do.

- 2. *Transparency and Communication*** – I know from my own experience as a diocesan staff member that it is always the case that those in the diocesan office sincerely believe that they are communicating as well as they can and are being as transparent as they can be, and that it is always the case that those in the parishes really have not heard or understood the message. Diocesan leaders must continue to tell the story again and again in all times and places, thinking of new or improved ways to communicate. If there are not regular electronic communications at least to the clergy, perhaps this could be explored.

And leaders must be careful that there be no information that is not shared. For example, some clergy knew that the deficits have been funded by borrowing from SR funds, but many learned that for the first time during our meetings. It is, I think, a good idea that Synod be asked for its thoughts about what budget items might be reduced or eliminated.

Every possible way of giving people all the information the leadership has and inviting as many as possible to be part of the decision-making process will help build trust and the spirit of unity that everyone wants.

Part of this is learning a new language in which to speak of these matters. I firmly believe that it is always demotivating to talk about money in terms of obligation. It doesn't work on the individual level, and it is unhelpful to talk only about obligation in the dealings between Church House and the congregations. Try always to talk about why congregations would **want** to fulfil their commitments. Talk about what the diocesan budget makes possible in our common life, not just about the money that must be paid.

- 3. *Assessment formula*** – At present the diocesan budget is formulated, and the amount required from assessments is divided by total assessable income to determine the percentage congregations will pay in the coming year. The assessment percentage, therefore, is unpredictable. Although I understand the percentage has not moved much in recent years, I heard in every meeting of churches whose assessable income had declined but whose assessment had increased because the percentage required for the diocesan budget had increased.

I would suggest that the Diocese as a whole consider having Synod adopt a fixed percentage as the formula. Congregations would then know from the time they filed their 2012 and 2013 financial reports what their 2015 assessment would be.

Such a system would have not only the benefit of increased transparency, but it would also mean that the diocesan budget would have to be made to work with the amount of income the assessment formula would provide. This change would, like the first recommendation, build trust by subjecting the diocesan budget to the same pressures and limitations that congregations face.

- 4. *Interest on unpaid balances*** — From the discussions I have had, it is clear that nothing in the life of the Diocese is as negative and unhelpful to building trust and unity as the present system of calculating interest on unpaid diocesan obligations. The matter came up repeatedly in every meeting I attended. At many of those meetings the complaints were very heated. The way this is now done is almost universally felt to be punitive and onerous. It makes people feel that they can never catch up with the payments in much the same way people who take out payday loans become chronically indebted.

The assumption is that the assessment is like a legal, contractual obligation. Failure to keep current with the assessment quarterly is considered taking a loan from Church House, and interest is charged on the loan. I understand the assumption, but I point out that this is a very top-down mechanism. I do not believe that any appreciable progress can be made toward building the spirit of unity, trust, and mutual accountability that everyone wants if this system remains as it is.

I cannot say exactly how best to change it, but perhaps the suggestion put forward in my meeting in Santa Cruz might be worth considering. They asked only that interest not be charged on the current year's assessment until January 15th of the following year, so that the results of the year-end efforts many congregations make to clear the assessment could be deposited.

However the leadership decides to proceed, I believe that reducing the budget deficits and addressing the system of interest on unpaid current account items are the two most urgent things that need to be done.

- 5. *Closures, mergers, consolidations into Cures*** – Many U.S. dioceses have been facing the question of how to handle congregations that are no longer viable. There are certainly no fast and easy ways to deal with these situations, and quick actions

unilaterally imposed from above, almost always leave a pernicious residue of resentment that ripple out far beyond the particular congregation(s) affected.

These actions are difficult, not because people are resistant to change, but precisely because the people remaining in an unviable congregation love the place where they have met God and where the important events in their lives have occurred. The resistance is a consequence of this love and their grief at the prospect of losing what they love. There is no pastoral challenge greater than dealing with these situations.

I can, however, outline some principles that might be useful to the Diocese as a whole as it addresses these situations.

First, in consultation at least with the Archdeacons and the Deans, and probably with the approval of Synod, come to a consensus on **criteria of non-viability**. In other words, what are some agreed-on parameters having to do with membership, finances, condition of the buildings, and location that would indicate that a congregation should be closed outright, or merged with another congregation, or consolidated into a Cure? The more there is widespread agreement on this, the less likely it is that actions will be perceived as arbitrary. At the same time, the discussion cannot be framed as one that is economically driven. See the points below.

Second, if property is to be sold, perhaps there is a way the remaining members of the congregation can be given a voice in how the proceeds of the sale will be used to further the mission of the Church. The more the members of the affected congregation can participate in such decisions, the less anger they will feel at the loss of what they love.

The following are some additional considerations which might help in these discussions. They are taken from the website <http://sandburconsulting.com>. It takes time and effort to have these discussions, especially if the hope is that the members of a merged congregation will be motivated to attend the church theirs is being merged with. The Bishops, Archdeacons, and Deans will need to prepare carefully for these discussions so they can be as productive as possible. Be prepared for the eventuality that, despite all the preparation and care, some will not go well.

If you are asking people to change, you need to be very clear about why. Is there clarity of calling and motivation? What is the vision that draws us into the future? How will this merged church better serve God and God's purposes in the world? How would it operate? What would it look like? What is the identified mission/service field? Does this vision build on strengths and resources? (rather than just minimizing shortages)

Theological language and images are necessary to tap spiritual resources for the journey. A merging for institutional survival or health alone is not good enough to sustain journey nor offer direction. How has this change/merger been framed Biblically/theologically? What is being done in worship and in prayer? How have people been invited into this as a spiritual adventure?

It is easy for pastors and leaders to get ahead of the congregation. Is the process transparent? What plans have been made to spread out sense of ownership beyond pastors and designated leaders? (eloping versus planning a big family wedding) Would the congregation be surprised by the process at any stage?

Church size affects model of pastoring and leadership expectations. What changes are likely to result from this merger in terms of pastoral and lay leadership? How can the 2-year window of energy/excitement following change be used to full advantage? What conversations have taken place about staffing options?

“I can change. . . . if I have to . . . I guess.” What attention has been paid to the emotionality of the system? (grief, anxiety, spiritual coping mechanisms, grace, forgiveness, resistance.)

Conclusion

I want again to express my gratitude for being asked to undertake this project and for all the clergy and laity I have met this week. I hope my efforts have been useful, and I will continue to pray for the Bishops, clergy and people of the Diocese of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands.

O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature: Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.