

Niagara Anglican Online

## The conservatism of Niagara

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The Diocese of Niagara prides itself on being a "liberal" diocese. Voting in favour of the blessing of same-sex unions is a recent example, but there are many other examples. We also like to avoid masculine language for God, and replace hierarchical terms like "kingdom" and "lord" with less inflammatory terms like "reign" and "God." Some of us don't hesitate to declare "old" doctrines such as the Trinity, the atonement, and the second coming, passé and dispensable. Others of us opt out of saying the creed. Would it be unfair to suggest that we even have a sneaking sense of superiority that these things are hallmarks of our diocese?

Yet I believe that, far from being liberal, these are actually deeply conservative moves, every one.

### Christ transforming culture

Some will remember Reinhold Niebuhr's classic, *Christ and Culture*, where he divides the ways Christian have responded to culture over the centuries into five types, from "Christ against culture" (those who want to separate themselves from secular culture) at one extreme to "Christ of culture" (those who see little distinction between the church and the surrounding culture) at the other end, with three mediating positions. His own chosen position is the middle one, "Christ transforming culture," which he sees as most faithful to the way of Jesus.

Our "liberalism" is really just an expression of the "Christ of culture" position. "Liberal" is supposed to mean free, independent, liberating, unafraid to be oneself, open to change. Yet our kind of "liberalism" actually means we are shackled to passing social and intellectual fashions, unwilling to think for ourselves. On same-sex unions, for instance, one leader in this diocese told me with a shrug a couple of years back, "Well, this is the way Canadian culture is going, so that's the way the church has to go." Where the world goes, the church has to go along. The same with doctrines that the secular world finds unacceptable: "You don't like them? Can't believe them? We're desperately sorry, we'll get rid of them tomorrow, if not sooner." It's basically a policy of appeasement, allowing the world to set the agenda for the church. Something Jesus modeled? I think not. And in any case, the world is pretty uninterested in our discussions about rearranging the deck chairs.

### Fresh expressions

Let me give you a couple of example of where I see a church truly trying to be "liberal." Both concern church planting and evangelism, which are among the marks of a truly liberal church—though not the only ones, of course.

One Canadian diocese has a Bishop's Church Planting Working Group, attended regularly by the bishop. At their synod last year, the bishop announced that he hoped to see five new churches planted in the diocese in the next ten years. He said, "If you are looking for permission to plant a new church, you have it!" There is true liberalism: free

to go against the trends of society, open to new things, however counter-cultural, helping the church be true to its God-given nature—which is (among other things) to grow.

My second example concerns the Church of England. If people have an image of the dear old C of E, it is generally of an elderly, genteel and sleepy church, centering on ancient, decaying buildings in delightful rural settings. That still exists, certainly, but there is also a renewal movement there called Fresh Expressions, which is changing the face of the church—and the country. Fresh Expressions are new ways of doing church for groups and cultures in the UK where there is no church. There is a church of Goths and a church of skateboarders; there are churches in police stations, churches for parents and children after school midweek, network churches, café churches, cell churches, Messy Churches (yes, really) and youth churches (not to be confused with youth groups).

Who is doing this? Those stuffy old conservative evangelicals, whose Anglicanism is rather suspect? Actually, though evangelicals are (as one might say) liberally involved, the movement is headed by Archbishop Rowan Williams, who has put his personal authority (and significant discretionary money) into this movement, and embraces true liberals of many persuasions. So far, there are around 650 "fresh expressions of church" listed on the official Fresh Expressions website. You can check it out—or ask Bishop Bird his impressions of the self-select session on Fresh Expressions at Lambeth.

### **Radical Liberalism**

Of course, starting a new church, especially a "fresh expression of church," is not for wimps, whatever label they may put on themselves. A timid theological liberal (a phrase which should be an oxymoron) is more likely to ask, "Will anybody be offended?" or "Let's not think about starting new churches while so many old ones are struggling," or "Would I still be on the diocesan pension plan?" or even "Why would we bother?" There might be some symbolism in the fact that, while the Niagara diocesan office has five people in the finance department, we no longer have even one Director of Evangelism.

The way of Jesus is not just to bless whatever society dictates—to add a mildly religious veneer to the culture. You don't get crucified (or resurrected for that matter) for doing that. The way of Jesus is rather to preach and live a way of doing things that is radically different from the world around. That radical difference is what is truly liberal—and truly liberating. Let's shed our false, timid "liberalism" and embrace the true, radical liberalism of Jesus.