

HOW MANY MISTAKES IS A BISHOP ALLOWED TO MAKE?

Or, HOW NOT TO BUILD A CHURCH!

In his foreword to James E. Healey's "Building a New Church" – A Process Manual for Pastors and Lay Leaders, (ISBN 978 – 0 - 8146 – 3269 -7), Nathan D. Mitchell stated five principles that parish communities, pastors and, indeed, bishops need to bear in mind when considering Church-building or Church-renovating projects:

1. The Church is a people before it is a building.
2. Worship spaces exist to serve the assembly's liturgy.
3. Participatory liturgy requires a participatory church.
4. Christian worship is not "altar-centered" or "ambo-centered" but both.
5. Finally, Christian worship is the starting point, not the destination.

Due consideration of these deceptively simple principles may have avoided some of the pitfalls that have been experienced by Bishop Frederik Henry, his Pastors, Father Tim Boyle (2001- 2011) and Father Kevin Tumback (2011 – the present).

Most Reverend Frederick Henry, Seventh Bishop of Calgary, Bishop Emeritus of Calgary

On January 16, 1998, Most Reverend Frederick Henry was named Bishop of Calgary after a two-year stint as Bishop of Thunder Bay, Ontario. Bishop Henry came with impressive academic and intellectual credentials. It was also clear that after thirteen years at St Peter's Seminary (and Rector for six years from 1981-1986), Bishop Henry was used to laying down the law and being obeyed without question.

Perhaps of greater significance is that in the thirty years since his ordination in 1968 to his appointment as Bishop of Calgary in 1998, Bishop Henry had had only two years of pastoral experience as Associate Pastor of Christ the King Parish, Windsor, Ontario from 1968-1970 and had never actually been Pastor of a parish. This lack of pastoral experience may explain some the mistakes that were made in Lethbridge.

As Procurator representing hundreds of parishioners, I want to make it clear that I, like most parishioners, held Bishop Henry in great respect and still do in spite of what many of us feel were errors in judgment or mistakes, whatever term applies, that were committed by him in his decisions regarding Lethbridge. I shall call them mistakes.

MISTAKE #1: Strategy to deal with the shortage of priests in the Diocese of Calgary

Within a few months of his arrival in the Diocese of Calgary, Bishop Henry had devised a strategy to deal with the shortage of priests in his diocese and his Diocesan Advisory councils in Calgary were quick to approve his plans. In no instance were the people of God in the parishes consulted. There were

complaints but most outlying parishes knew that their numbers were too few to matter to the bureaucrats in Calgary. We know, however, that when the parishes of Raymond and Coalhurst, near Lethbridge, were closed many parishioners were so upset that they ceased attending any church thus denying themselves the spiritual sustenance of the Holy Eucharist.

MISTAKE #2: Merging Parishes in Lethbridge

In 2001, Bishop Henry turned his attention to Lethbridge. He sent Father Tim Boyle as Pastor with instructions to merge the parishes of St. Patrick's Church and Our Lady of the Assumption. Neither parish was happy about being merged but they accepted the reason given by Father Tim that it would be easier for him to administer the two churches as one unit. By 2005, St. Basil's Church became part of the merger, again not without some murmurs of dissent.

In 2006, it became clear that what had happened in Lethbridge was part of the strategy devised by Bishop Henry in 1998 and the Machiavellian intention of the Bishop was to close and eventually sell all three churches in East Lethbridge, now collectively known as All Saints Parish, and build a large, 1,200 seat church on the South-east outskirts of the city.

MISTAKE #3: Refusing to listen to Parishioners.

Parishioners realized that Father Tim was only carrying out the orders of the Bishop. At least three petitions and a deluge of letters were sent to Bishop Henry. Bishop Henry's response to the petitions was: "I normally do not respond to petitions as they are a weak form of protest and there is always the question of who the signatories are and was there any coercion applied, etc. Petitions are one step above anonymous letters." Bishop Henry's invariable response to letters was that the *status quo* was unacceptable, and the only option open to parishioners was to get involved in the planning of the new church.

MISTAKE #4: Offering to "save" St. Patrick's Church

Bishop Henry was probably informed by Father Tim that the supporters of St. Patrick's Church were a sizeable part of the opposition to the new church. So Bishop Henry came up with what he termed a "win-win" solution to "save" St. Patrick's Church: "renovating and converting St. Patrick's into a Chapel and reconfiguring the basement into a Columbarium" that would generate funds that would help to maintain St. Patrick's Church. Most parishioners saw this as a less than subtle means of sidelining St. Patrick's Church so that it would not draw people – or funds - away from Bishop Henry's pet project i.e. the new Church. The parishioners made it clear that the Bishop's "win-win" solution was unacceptable: they wanted St. Patrick's Church to remain open as the fully viable parish Church it had always been.

MISTAKE #5: The Bishop writes an undated very un-Bishop like letter

Possibly upset that the parishioners had not accepted his gracious “win-win” solution. Bishop Henry wrote an extraordinary undated letter that I would respectfully suggest no Bishop should write ever write to his flock. He announced his decision that “St Patrick’s Church will be shuttered effective August1, 2011.” He expressed the hope that the closure would “temporary” but it will continue until the parishioners came up with a funding program... acceptable to the Diocesan Planning Commission, the Diocesan Finance Council, and the Diocesan Consultors.”

What made the letter even more extraordinary was the concluding paragraph:

“For those parishioners who find this decision difficult or impossible to accept, I would suggest that for both your personal well-being and that of the Eastside faith community that serious consideration be given to joining the worshipping community at St. Martha’s Parish in West Lethbridge.”

As one parishioner tersely put it, “I never thought a Bishop would ever ask me to take a hike across the river.” Be that as it may, many parishioners took the Bishop at his word and left All Saints Parish, some to attend other area Catholic churches, some to worship at an Anglican or Evangelical church, while an unknown number ceased to attend any church at all. A good shepherd would be concerned at the loss of one sheep. In Bishop Henry’s case, it is clear that moving ahead and accelerating “the building of the new All Saints Church” was more important than the welfare of souls...

This document – and other subsequent documents issued by Bishop Henry reveal that although Bishop Henry’s credentials as an academic were undoubtedly very good, when it came to Canon Law neither he nor his advisers in Calgary were on solid ground.

MISTAKE #6: “A Made in Lethbridge Solution”

Once it became known that Bishop Henry and his advisory councils had made the decision to sell three churches and build a new church in East Lethbridge in **1998**, his claim that it was a “Made in Lethbridge Solution!” rang very hollow indeed. Yet he persisted in using the phrase not realising that it reflected on his own credibility and the manipulative process going on in Lethbridge. Neither Bishop Henry nor his pastors were using a collaborative pattern of decision-making: From the start it was a classic Top>Down model with the Bishop and his Pastors making sure that everything would go according to Bishop’s plans - even if he never once came to Lethbridge to speak to the people or answer their concerns.

MISTAKE #7: The Location of the New Church

Although there has been a Building Committee from the start, and it dutifully selected several possible sites for the new church, it was clear that Bishop Henry favoured a location on the south–eastern

outskirts of the city. We can only speculate on the reasons for his choice but they were important enough for him to use Diocesan funds to purchase 55 acres of land to secure the 9 acres needed for the new church. As the entire planning for the new church has been lacking in openness and transparency, what follows may not be completely accurate in detail but the assumptions arising from them remain valid.

MISTAKE #8: City Not Planning to Service the Land for 15-20 Years

As the City of Lethbridge has made it clear that the land will not be serviced in the near future, if the Church is to be built as announced within the next four years, there will be additional expenditures necessary to connect the Church property to services at the nearest point that they are available. This will add several thousands of dollars to the cost of the building.

MISTAKE #9: Committing the Parish to Building a New Church before 50% of the cost was raised

The decision to build a new church was made before there was a single cent in the Building Fund let alone the minimum of 50% of the total cost of the project that is required by Diocesan regulations before ground can be broken. Yet it was hailed by Bishop Henry as a “Made in Lethbridge” solution. It was nothing of the kind and is in fact a text book case of the dangers of clericalism. In the unrealistic planning of Father Tim Boyle and his plethora of committees, the new church would be opened in 2012. By 2011 it was clear that the project was seriously stalled. Father Tim was reassigned in 2011 and replaced as Pastor by Father Kevin Tumback, a man with a reputation for getting a job done. In his own words, the Bishop had ordered him to build a church. He had given a vow of obedience to the Bishop. He would therefore build a church. The people of God and their wishes were irrelevant. The Bishop had given him an order and he would obey.

MISTAKE #10: A Plan that has failed once is unlikely to succeed the second time

With Bishop Henry’s approval, Father Kevin took up where Father Tim had left off. Again there is an air of secrecy of how they are going to raise the Building fund from \$8 million to \$15 million which is, we believe, what Bishop McGrattan has wisely set as the minimum that should be in the Fund before building can begin. The parishioners whom I represent as Procurator, and I, wish Father Kevin and the Building Committee well. We have not opposed the building of the new Church except insofar as it constitutes a threat to the continued existence of the three churches we wish to save. As far as we know, the fund-raising is going to be carried out on the same lines as ten years ago so why will the outcome be different? The only unknown factor is whether Father Kevin has some very generous major donors lined up ready to make sizeable donations.

MISTAKE #11: Have all the Funds raised so far come from parishioner donations?

No, they haven't. We know that about \$2million was in The Diocesan Central Fund from bequests and other sources of revenue even before a new church was even mentioned. It was meant for repairs and renovations to our three existing churches. Bishop Henry decided unilaterally to transfer that sum from the Diocesan Central Fund to his favourite project, the Lethbridge New Church Building Fund.

MISTAKE #12: Rob the Poor to make the Rich more comfortable...

If #11 was a questionable transfer of funds, even more questionable were the Bishop's action in 2015. Catholic Charities Clothes Bank (CCCB) was a locally owned not for profit charity started originally by the Church Women's League but more recently administered by a Board of representatives from the various parishes.

In 2015, because of the economy and several other reasons, the CCCB found itself in a negative cash flow situation and needed an injection of \$50,000.00 which should not have been a major obstacle as CCCB had assets worth almost a million dollars. The problem was that the good ladies of the CWL had in their caution lodged the title deeds of the CCCB with the then Bishop of Calgary, Bishop Paul O'Byrne who greatly admired the CWL for their charitable activities. When CCCB approached the banks for a loan, they were turned down as they were not in possession of their title deeds. So CCCB approached Bishop Henry to either release their title deeds or furnish them with a loan of \$50,000.00.

Bishop Henry was able to recognize a cash grab opportunity and refused to do either, CCCB had no option but to sue the Bishop to obtain possession of the title deeds. The Alberta Court of Appeal ruled that as the Bishop had the title deeds, he was the legal owner of the properties. The CCCB lost the legal battle though many felt that a Bishop who cared for the poor would have done what he could to help the CCCB continue with its good work to help the poor. Bishop Henry asked Father Kevin to liquidate the assets of the CCCB. When all outstanding debts were settled, a balance of \$525,000.00 was assigned by the Bishop to his pet project in Lethbridge – the new Church building Fund. These funds came from properties that were used for helping the poor of Lethbridge and the money should have been utilised in some way to benefit the poor. Bishop Henry apparently did not have any conflict of conscience in donating the money to a church that was going to be built to replace three well-loved churches and now two buildings that used to serve the poor.

CONCLUSION

1.

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18)

Jesus chose a rock on which to build his Church. He did not choose nine acres of swampy ground that will need to be drained and will need to be connected to existing City services about 300m away across a very busy 4-lane divided highway. Perhaps Bishop Henry's voices bade him choose a location for undisclosed reasons but the location does not sit well with the vast majority of East Lethbridge parishioners. There are other aspects of Bishop Henry's handling of the Lethbridge New Church Building that would yield additional material that would call into question Bishop Henry's legacy in Lethbridge. It is too early to tell.

I do believe, however, there is enough evidence already to indict Bishop Henry for the harm that he has caused in Lethbridge. We hold our priests and bishops in high regard because of their sacred calling. Equally well, as has happened in recent weeks and in several countries, our beloved Church has been rocked to its foundations by the number of allegations against priests and bishops. Our Holy Father has rightly announced that there will be zero tolerance for priests and bishops guilty of wrongdoing. I do not for a moment suggest that what has occurred in Lethbridge is in the same category as sexual predators and molesters. It has, however, led to loss of souls for which someone should be held accountable. It may not be the role of the Signatura to apportion blame. Surely, however, if something went wrong in Lethbridge, the Signatura needs to ensure that the same mistakes don't occur elsewhere. The people whom I represent as Procurator have taken a long and arduous road in our quest for justice. I hope that when the Signatura makes its final ruling, the safety and integrity of St. Patrick's Church will be clearly established and guidelines established so that what happened in Lethbridge will not happen anywhere else.

May God bless the holy work of the Supreme Council of the Apostolic Signatura.

Francis D. Noronha

Procurator
