**Vicar’s Voice #VoteScience brings strangers together**

Winter 2020

As an Anglican Vicar of a small parish in the eastern end of the Fraser I am blessed to be in a very progressive faith community within a very progressive Anglican Diocese, the Diocese of New Westminster. The parish is populated by a number of highly educated professional people some of whom are retired scientists as well as a community of folks from the farming area as well as First Nations people. I come from a background of being a social scientist and I have never seen any conflict between the spiritual practice and science. Our parish has celebrated in recent years the feast of St. Thomas as the feast of St. Thomas the Scientist, instead of calling him “Thomas the Doubter” which is derisive. We have always tended to integrate our education with thoughtful evidence-based discussion and rejoiced that one of its major foundations of authority is ‘reason’.

In September 2019, I noted the campaign “#VoteScience” led by Evidence for Democracy and a number of other Canadian science organizations and was intrigued by it. Agassiz is a small village situated in a very religiously conservative community. I checked out the campaign and one element that caught my attention was a list of questions prepared by the campaign. These questions all focused on science issues were designed as prompts to ask candidates who came knocking on doors during the campaign period. I decided to publish the questions on a weekly basis in the church bulletin during the federal campaign. I also preached a sermon on faith and science that encouraged the joining of the two disciplines in a positive creative manner in the political sphere. The talk noted numerous historic famous scientists who were often spiritual people. Politics is a vehicle for having your voice heard and recognized and the election was a legitimate opportunity to engage with the larger community. I noted that it was through their spiritual connection to the earth and the universe that early scientists were motivated to explore in a thoughtful disciplined way what they were experiencing. Many of these scientists are recognized and have their remains buried within Canterbury Cathedral in the United Kingdom. It is part of the tradition of the Anglican Church to be open to diversity and to have a critical reasoned approach towards faith. There is no conflict between a healthy open loving faith and science.

The impact of these conversations around science within the parish was very positive. Every Sunday following the church service we meet at something called “the Vicar's Roundtable”. It is an opportunity for the congregation to question what I've said in the service, to discuss with each other and bring out other points of view. The results were very favourable towards the sermon as they are happy to have an experience of a faith community where spirituality and science are not seen as being mutually exclusive.

As the federal election campaign moved forward, I was excited to learn that members of the parish went to community ‘meet the candidate nights’ and asked questions of all the candidates that reflected the question circulated in the #VoteScience campaign. People also talked about their faith and a scientific understanding of life in very open and concrete ways. The questions animated a lot of discussion at the meetings. In the small community, the votes increased for those parties that valued science and had a more positive outlook on evidenced-based decision-making. Sadly, despite our best efforts, science-friendly candidates were not elected.

The ripple effect of the #VoteScience campaign did continue after the election. I met at a climate rally before the election Dr. Tim Cooper from UFV. He attended a Climate Rally where I was wearing my #Vote Science button. He saw my button and we talked and I invited him to speak at the parish. His talk animated the people to sponsor a full study day on Climate Change that was held in Agassiz on January 11 with almost 50 people in attendance. Some of these folks had been sceptical of Climate Change. Additionally, one of the local political party organization’s members was so moved by the talk in the church that Dr. Cooper gave that he has reached out to talk with the party about revising their climate policies. Neither of these events would have happened without the #VoteScience campaign.

The perceived conflict between spirituality and science is an artificial construct. At some level we all are reflective and want to see facts as part of the foundation of our decision-making. We also are at some level spiritually alive where we connect to something beyond ourselves. The problem comes when we try to literalize our spiritual understanding. Another factor is that spirituality can be used as a tool to manipulate individuals. When this happens, we often confuse metaphor with facts that can lead to dangerous conclusions.

A case in point, is the whole discussion surrounding the truth of climate change. The truth of climate change is scientifically evidence-based and has nothing to do with faith or spirituality. The spiritual aspects of the current climate crisis discussion is the truth that it is as philosopher-economist David Schweickart notes  ‘miraculous’ that we now have the ability to see what is happening to the climate and have alternate solutions to the burning of hydrocarbons for sources of energy. Solar, wind, and hydro all present sustainable energy sources which we can use and that were not readily available a hundred years ago. These have arisen from the work of science and the need to apply them has come from the study of the environment in a scientific manner. In truth, this is a miracle of our own time, for which I spiritually celebrate and am thankful.  I note that science and spirituality do work together for the benefit of the whole community.

I am grateful to All Saints Parish which empowered me to have the freedom to be a part of the national #VoteScience campaign. The campaign of #VoteScience has provided an opportunity to underline the importance of science for all people in their daily lives. I am grateful for the people who organized and supported the campaign to make it possible in Canada during the past federal election with positive implications for the future.  We must in the days ahead never loose our focus on being Alive Christians who are tuned in and in concert with the evidence that science provides as we faithfully live in belief of a loving creating God.