

Touchstone

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Narratives from the Pastorate

Editorial	2
Narratives from the Pastorate	6
Profile: Elizabeth Anne Barrett by Gayle Simonson	56
Reviews	
<i>What Does the Bible Say? A Critical Conversation with Popular Culture in a Biblically Illiterate World</i> edited by Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg John H. Young	63
<i>Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine</i> by Cynthia Rigby Catherine Faith MacLean	65
<i>The Theology of The United Church of Canada</i> edited by Don Schweitzer, Robert Fennell, and Michael Bourgeois Ryan Slifka	67
<i>Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945</i> by Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald John Badertscher	69
<i>Who's Minding the Story? The United Church of Canada Meets a Secular Age</i> by Jeff Seaton Brian Walton	71

EDITORIAL

At a continuing education event at Union Theological Seminary some years ago, the leader—Prof. Tom Driver—told us that he went to church each Sunday hoping to hear a good story. In one sense he may have been expressing the universal human desire to be enthralled with the telling of a tale. In another, though, he was pointing to one of the most compelling aspects of Christian worship—the passing on of a tradition rooted in the narratives of patriarchs, lawgivers, prophets, and disciples.

This ongoing remembrance (*anamnesis*) of the scriptural story is more than entertaining; it has the power to shape personal and communal identity, and to re-shape them. Driver, whose research was then influenced by anthropologist Victor Turner, maintained that gathered Christian worship has the capacity to generate liminal experience; to provide a threshold into a transcendent dimension. Though we often seem to acquiesce in prosaic forms of worship, such “threshold” experience is possible through openness to the moving of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the scriptural story that we inhabit in worship portrays a different world than the one controlled by oligarchs, demagogues, and despots; it holds at its heart expectation of the coming of God’s full reign. And this means that authentic worship cannot be anything else than counter-cultural.

The Bible contains a diversity of literature, and each genre has its *raison d’être* and moment of significance—the majestic promulgation of the Law, the blazing denunciations of the prophets, the ecstatic verses of the Song of Solomon, the piercing dialogue of Job with his comforters and his tormenting God, and the startling genealogy of Jesus that includes Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. Nevertheless, such non-narrative significance arises in the course of the unfolding history of God’s dealing with Israel and church. Without the story of a divine fashioning of the world and of a people, and of God’s restless seeking to bring the straying and the proud home, none of the other literature would have arisen. For Christians, of course, the gospel of Jesus constitutes the climax of God’s seeking and also the pre-eminent expression of divine law, prophecy, and wisdom. *Tell me the stories of Jesus.*

The power of story as a theological vehicle has been recognized in the last several decades through the movements of narrative theology and narrative preaching. These arose partly through the influence of the broader movement of European philosophy in which hermeneutics, the interpretation of texts, becomes central to the interpretation of the human condition. Heroic epic, ancient drama, biblical narrative, and poetry all can be understood as pivotal expressions of human self-understanding,

worthy of philosophical attention. The texts of the Bible, especially the narratives, certainly fit such a hermeneutical program. Says the New Catholic Encyclopedia:

Advocates of narrative theology argue that not only is the Church's faith fundamentally narrative in structure, but that human experience itself reflects a "storied" character. It therefore follows that full participation in the ecclesial community and the formation of Christian identity assumes access to and knowledge of the Church's own "story" of salvation.¹

Clearly, a narrative approach to theology has a credible warrant since it coheres with the Bible's own leading way of communicating faith. Moreover, a theology that acknowledges and uses the power of story to generate faith has a greater appeal than one largely dependent on doctrine and on propositional exposition. The bones need flesh.

In the spirit of putting narrative flesh on the bones of doctrine, I have thought for some time that *Touchstone* should devote a number to the telling of stories from the pastorate. Happily, the editorial board agreed. There are theological riches in pastoral experience, and theological perspective is often surprised and refined in the course of pastoral responsibility and encounter. Such discoveries may come more frequently in the early years of ministry—when there is much to experience and learn. But not all epiphanies in ministry come early; sometimes new challenge and insight can come to us in maturity, as it did for Nicodemus. *Can a man be born again when he is old?*

There are risks, of course, in the theological use of personal experience. Despite such risks, it still seemed good to invite a cross-section of ministers to share narratives from their experience in the pastorate. Stories from the interaction of ministers and lay people lend a quality of authentication to scriptural and doctrinal witness. Thus, a story may reflect the wonder of grace in operation; or the consolation of Christian community in the face of tragic circumstance; or the way that perceived failure can illumine the actual nature of hope. Such stories give witness to God's story.

The authors whose stories appear in this number of *Touchstone* were invited to contribute a telling narrative from early pastoral life, offering biblical/theological reflection on it. A few of those contributing

¹ R. Maas, "Narrative Theology," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/narrative-theology>. Accessed 13 November 2019.

actually tell stories from different contexts than the pastorate. But they tell their stories as pastors, and so are presented here. I wish that I could have reached out to many more authors than those whose stories could be included here. Perhaps a book would be in order; there are many stories to tell of human struggle and blessing in the Christian community, and to do so in the light of Christ.

Adding to the weight of narrative in this number is our profile, by Gayle Simonson, who tells the story of Elizabeth Barrett, a pioneering Methodist missionary educator. Barrett's work took place primarily in the west on Indigenous reserves. She worked with better known missionaries like Henry Bird Steinhauer and John MacDougall, but her story shows that she was worthy of their company. Barrett founded the first Protestant mission in southern Alberta. Her story is one of dedicated faithfulness.

Our number closes with five book reviews, each offering insightful perspective on intriguing books. We are grateful to our reviewers.

I too have a story.

In late July 1969, I arrived from Ontario with my wife Joan and a five-month-old daughter in St. Paul, Alberta, to begin ordained ministry on the St. Paul-Ashmont Pastoral Charge. We drove into town giddy with excitement at the unfolding adventure, and were to spend five happy and fulfilling years there. But nothing ever topped the challenge of my first pastoral responsibility, also my very first funeral.

When picking up the keys for the manse at the post office, I was directed to the home of the senior elder. There had been a death: a young man had fallen from bridge construction over the North Saskatchewan River, near Myrnam, a village just south of the river. Lawrence Proskiw was the son of one of the many Ukrainian families whose forebears had settled in northern Alberta. Some were members of the Ukrainian Orthodox or Ukrainian Catholic Churches, some had become members of the United Church, and some were unaffiliated but looked to the United Church in time of crisis.

I also learned that some, who had emigrated from imperial Russia before the Revolution, had become members of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), and that, when the president of the CPC, Tim Buck, came to Alberta, one of his biggest rallies was at Myrnam.

After getting a warm welcome and then information about the grieving family and local funeral customs from the elder, I met with the family to learn about Lawrence, discovering that some of the older people in the circle were not able to speak much English.

Because the family roots were in neighbouring Myrnam, the funeral was to be held in the Elks Hall there, with interment in the local cemetery. I was resolved that we would have a thoroughly Christian service from the United Church service book. The gospel would be proclaimed and we would sing hymns of praise and consolation. There was a piano in the hall, and with someone local engaged to play, I loaded up all the little black hymn books from the St. Paul church to take to Myrnam, travelling in the funeral director's car. As it turned out, I sang, but not many others did. Many of the older folk did not read English.

I knew that the service would be attended by a cross-section of the community, including Communist Party members. The central text I chose was from John 11, the raising of Lazarus, and, in the course of preaching about the resurrection power and love of Jesus Christ, I offered a little crusading critique of the teaching of Karl Marx.

What I did not know—until the funeral director told me as we were travelling south to Myrnam—was that the local Communist Party secretary, an older man, had been asked to speak about Lawrence at the close of the service. The funeral director advised me to withdraw after pronouncing the benediction, and wait in the car for the journey to the cemetery. From the car, window down, I could hear the Ukrainian speech of the secretary, but had no idea what he was saying.

When we arrived at the cemetery, the secretary approached to say that he would speak at the graveside also—again after me. Determined that the church's committal ritual would be the last word, I replied that he would speak first or not at all. When he finished, again speaking in Ukrainian, I began with a passage from a psalm, introducing it by saying, "You have heard the word of man; now hear the word of God."

For several days afterward I felt some regret. Had I been peremptory, even insulting, to the older man? However, I was to learn later from the funeral director that in fact I had become a minor celebrity. The younger members of the Ukrainian community had been waiting for years for someone to put the secretary in his place, so long had he harangued them with outmoded Communist orthodoxies.

Today I realize that the secretary likely had been invited because he was both a public speaker and also spoke Ukrainian. I wish now that I had been friendlier to him, but am glad that the service had the character it did, and that, as a young minister, I had the confidence to proclaim the church's faith there.

Peter Wyatt

NARRATIVES FROM THE PASTORATE

A MISSED ENCOUNTER

by **Kenneth Bagnell**

In the 1960s a respected American scholar named Harold DeWolf, a Methodist minister and professor of theology at Boston University, decided that he and his wife would have a summer visit to Canada's green and lush New Brunswick. They decided to settle comfortably in what is still called Fundy National Park. It's on the edge of the blue Bay of Fundy among grassy hills and forests. It had then, and still has, rental cottages.

DeWolf's students came from near and far. He was an amiable man and had kindly planned to bring along a Black student whose doctoral studies he was directing. He felt that Canadian people would welcome the student and his wife. Sad to say, when he decided to confirm this with Fundy Park's senior administrator, the letter he received stated that no one could guarantee that there would not be embarrassing comments or attitudes. DeWolf felt the letter basically recommended that he not bring the couple with him to Fundy Park. This all happened in 1960 when I was the young minister of five churches, particularly Alma, the town at the foot of Fundy Park.

When the DeWolfs arrived at Fundy National Park they were without his gifted student and his wife. Having heard of this from the DeWolfs at our manse one evening, I took the matter up with my local MP. Before the DeWolfs left our company I learned that the student was Martin Luther King, Jr. Officially the incident was deplored, and when the park administrator found that his letter had been mentioned to government officials, he was not pleased with me, the local minister.

Little did I know then that in a few years I would sit in the back of a limo with Martin Luther King, having been invited to interview him on his way to lecture at Holy Blossom Synagogue. Even more unknown to me then was that in the future—1968—I would be an editorial writer at *The Toronto Star* and assigned the task of writing about King's assassination.

Kenneth Bagnell is a retired United Church minister whose career has included several distinguished journalistic posts. He lives in Toronto.

AN ELDER'S JOYFUL WITNESS

by Ross Bartlett

I often think of Harold, an elder in one of the points on my settlement charge. I was very young, even for my comparatively youthful chronological stage, and totally out of my context as a city boy plunked down in the middle of farming country. Like many before me and since, I had a large fund of theological and biblical information—and a whole lot to learn about ministry. In those days, there were many pastoral charges across the country that had a genuine vocation in taking the newly ordained and commissioned, and shaping them into clergy worthy of the name. I don't know what good it did them, but it was a precious gift to the wider church.

I did not have the vocabulary at the time for what I knew instinctively: Harold could have been a patriarch for that little country church, but he actively avoided that role. Oh, he was certainly respected: a successful businessman, repeatedly re-elected to the county council, multiple terms as deputy reeve, as much a pillar in local service organizations as in the church. But in the church, he chose to adopt the quiet and solid role traditionally played by the elder: caring for his district, participating in spiritual decision-making, anchoring a corner of the little choir each Sunday, witnessing in quiet word and deed, counselling his minister when asked, always supportive even in disagreement. The other thing about Harold? He was dying. Roughly fifteen years before my arrival on that charge, he had been given six months to live. Cancer had made its unwelcome abode in a number of places in his body. Having apparently exhausted all the responses of medical science, Harold had been sent home, ostensibly to die. But he didn't. And he could recount, in quiet moments, his decision to live the remainder of his life with joy. There was neither aggrandizement nor sappy piety in this telling (which he did only rarely). It was as if, faced with the prognosis of a fairly imminent end, this was the only logical and faithful decision possible! Wouldn't anyone make such a choice? My pastoral experience suggests quite the opposite.

Prior to that my life had been mercifully free of experiences of long-term illness in anyone with whom I was close. So, I was learning a great deal, all at once. I can say that neither before nor since have I known anyone of such grounded joy. Harold's life had many of the features which are normal parts of the human journey: business challenges, heartbreak in his extended family, community confrontations and the like. He had fistfuls of pills that he took regularly; he was not

about to turn his back on whatever medical science could do. But through all of it, he maintained a solid faith and a joy-filled approach to life. He laughed more than anyone I can recall. As far as his physical strength would allow, he served his neighbour and community. His home was one of those “safe places” that crop up in some pastoral charges—a sanctuary where the minister can step out of role and own the challenges, disappointments, and simple not-knowing-what-to-do in the face of behaviours and patterns entrenched for decades amongst families that had farmed along that county road for generations.

Eventually, about seventeen years after his diagnosis, Harold came to the end of his earthly pilgrimage. I spent a number of hours with him in those final weeks—for my benefit not his!—and the quiet confidence and joy that sustained him for so long never ebbed. He wasn’t in a rush to leave those who loved him here, but neither was he afraid. That little country church was packed for his funeral, there were speakers on the lawn and in the old schoolhouse that served as a hall, and the local radio station broadcast it live.

When I think of Harold, I recall the number of times in Scripture that God’s people are reminded that faith, both in its ideas and practices, is a gift of God and comes through those who have walked the path before us. Whether it is the Deuteronomic recital, “My ancestor was a wandering Aramean,” or Paul reminding Timothy of the faith he had inherited from those bold women of a previous generation, we do not make up this church “thing” for ourselves. Creative and innovative as faithfulness demands that we be, there is always beneath our feet a foundation of practice and experience. Speaking personally, it was a faith and experience foundation that helped make one theological graduate into a pastor.

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MARKING TIME AND MARKING DEATH**by Michael Brooks**

Three days into a student supply appointment, the telephone rang shortly after 11 p.m. “Preacher,” the RCMP officer said, “your presence is needed to sit with a family. There has been a tragedy.”

I arrived at the secluded rural property and a young constable filled me in: “Albert went fishing along the river this afternoon. He didn’t come home. We’re not sure what happened. The family is inside.”

I approached the modest wood-framed house and Eileen, Albert’s wife in her mid-sixties, answered the door. She was calm, but it was clear she had been weeping. Eileen introduced Randy, Albert’s son, who sat with his sister, Beth, on one side, and girlfriend, Carrie on the other.

“We shouldn’t have let him go alone,” Randy said. “He insisted,” Eileen shot back. I said nothing, trying to wear my most empathetic face. For three hours, long periods of silence were broken occasionally by the odd, seemingly trivial, comment. Then, an officer appeared. “We found him,” he said, wearing a solemn face. The look and the tone said it all. Albert would not be coming home alive. The family formed a circle and collapsed into one another’s arms. I paused a moment and then gently put my hand on Eileen’s shoulder. No words were spoken; only tears shed.

After what seemed like another hour but in reality was only a few minutes, the officer said they found Albert downstream from where he had been fishing. He had fallen in the river and banged his head. As the news was shared, Eileen sat in silence, staring at the floor. “I want to see him,” she finally said quietly, but with enough intention that we all knew it needed to happen.

We were driven in a police cruiser along the river and into the woods. Each family member slowly and solemnly walked past the back of an RCMP truck where Albert was lying, face up on the tailgate. Eileen went first. She paused, stared for a few seconds and then moaned loudly. The others followed, eventually collapsing again into weeping as they viewed the body. I was last. You can imagine the gruesome sight: a cold, blood-spattered corpse that had been submerged in the river for several hours. I glanced down briefly. Raising my right hand slightly and extending it over the body, I said quietly, “Albert, rest in peace.”

The events of that cool, early spring evening taught me about two important functions of ministry: marking time, and marking death.

I cannot hear the Bible’s most well-known words about time without thinking of Albert, Eileen, Randy, Beth, and Carrie: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

(Eccl 3: 1) There was a time that night to keep silence and a time to speak (Eccl 3: 7) as we sat together for hours. There was a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing (Eccl 3: 5) as family members held one another in community and then released one another for personal grieving. There was a time to weep and a time to laugh (Eccl 3: 4) as memories were shared. There was a time to seek and a time to lose (Eccl 3: 6) as we sought, with hope, the possibility that Albert would be found alive, and then lost that hope when the devastating news came. There was, as there is in all things, a time to be born, and a time to die (Eccl 3: 2).

Those four hours taught me that an authentic ministry of presence marks time by gently pointing to God's time—*kairos* time—and lovingly pointing away from the *chronos* time of the culture.

The second thing I learned is that there is no substitute for marking in-the-flesh death. Intentionally marking the physicality of death creates the possibility that God may mark life, for “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12: 24).

Thomas G. Long suggests that rituals in other faiths which honour the body should remind Christians that “the body is the way we have received God's gift of life in this person. We have washed the body of this one in baptism, fed this body at the Lord's Table, prayed together with the words of our mouths, joined hands with this one in service to the world in the name of Christ, and touched this person's body in holy blessing and peace. And now bearing the dead body of this saint is the way we will experience and bear witness to the transition from this life to the next.”¹

The same hand that rested on Eileen's shoulder was lifted over Albert's bloody body in the woods. It was the same hand placed on the casket as I spoke the Words of Commendation at the funeral several days later, and the same hand that blessed the congregation the following Sunday as Eileen and her family sat in their grief. Marking time, marking death. At 26 years of age, these were big lessons for me.

Michael Brooks is Lead Minister of Port Nelson United Church, Burlington, ON. The names used and some details of this story have been altered to protect the identities of the subjects involved.

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¹ Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 31.

NOT SAFE, BUT KEPT IN LOVE

by Ann Corbet

If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown—that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love.

Julian of Norwich

“Welcome to the Eastern Labrador Pastoral Charge, Rev. Ann. There’s just one thing . . . well, there’s someone living in the manse. You see, we just weren’t sure when you were coming and we rented the manse out to someone else.” My heart sank. How could they not know that I, Ann Corbet, proud graduate of Emmanuel’s class of ’92 was arriving on June 30 from London Ontario to bless them with my presence?

Over the course of the next four years, I discovered that a shortage of communication and coordination with the Conference Office was in abundant supply. But who could have predicted that within a few weeks my new roommate and I would be sharing, not only the manse, but a bottle of red wine as well, and that we would be laughing uproariously together? But on that less than illustrious day of my arrival, newly-minted and newly-ordained, I felt that I was falling into an abyss. As time evolved, however, it was an abyss I learned to embrace. That leap of faith I took by offering myself to serve the people of Labrador shaped my spirituality. It humbled me, stretched me, and deepened my faith. There was much with which I struggled—the Labradorian personality, the restrained expression of faith, the long winters, and the reality of physical and social isolation. And yet, if ministry is about “call,” and we continue to insist that it is, then surely we are encouraged to pay attention to all invitations, not solely the ones that instantly appeal. I want to touch briefly on lessons learned in Labrador that helped to shape my spirituality, theology, and ministry for the future.

1) Not everyone is an extrovert. Labradorians have a two-hundred year legacy of trapping, and because of that history of isolation, they are generally not as outgoing as Newfoundlanders. Because I was convinced that a pastoral visit should last at least three-quarters of an hour, poor Dulcy and I sat in agony one day in her living room, struggling to make conversation. Dulcy would have been much happier had we chatted, shared a cup of tea, and closed with a prayer, all within twenty minutes.

2) Folk long to be prayed for and with. They need to know that they are held in the intimate, infinite embrace of God, and that their minister believes in the power of prayer.

3) Simplistic hymns and “foreign” religious practices are not all bad. I learned to love and to play “Count your blessings,” which has kept me in good stead in many a nursing home sing-along. I had a profound spiritual experience when, on a Good Friday in the Salvation Army church, I responded to an altar call. At the invitation of the presider, I came to the front of the church and knelt at the foot of the cross. The befuddled Salvationists did not know what to do with me, but it was a beautiful experience none the less.

4) Participation in an ecumenical ministerial broadens one’s understanding of the church, and keeps one humble. It can also frustrate you, but it might introduce you to some courageous and free-spirited Sisters of the Roman Catholic variety.

5) Social justice “goes down” a lot more easily when pastoral care is delivered well. When you form solid relationships with folk, and they know that you genuinely care for their well-being, the words of prophecy are heard with generous ears.

6) God the Creator dwells not only within the lush deciduous forests of southern Ontario, but also within the scraggly pines of Labrador. Labrador is known for its proliferation of evergreens and rock. Often the barren landscape overwhelmed me, and yet, 23 years later, I give thanks for those things I cannot glimpse in southern Ontario today—a July sun that refuses to dip beyond the horizon, that same sun whose rays bounce off the snow, thus rendering sunglasses necessary in December, and of course, the celestial Northern Lights. Where else can one fly in a helicopter to a burial site (three times, if I remember correctly, and once, with the deceased in tow), and ride on a sled behind a dog team?

Did I, over the course of four years, experience the long dark night of the soul? At times, the darkness and the sense of isolation held me in their grasp. And yet, parishioners surrounded me with their warm embrace, gifted me with patience, and upheld me with pride. On one particular Holy Week, when I was begrudging the relentless cold, I discovered a gorgeous dried flower arrangement on my doorstep, one which must have required painstaking labour. “Happy Easter, Rev. Ann,” said the card. Thus unfolded a ministry grounded not only in the lessons of my Protestant heroes, but also of folk like Julian of Norwich, for I learned that ministry is never about playing it safe; rather, “in falling and rising again” I am “always kept in that same precious love.”

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HOWARD'S JACKET

by Brian Donst

Then the eyes of the both were opened, and they knew they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God said, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself". . . And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them."(Gen 3:7-10, 21 NRSV)

Howard's jacket seemed surprisingly thin. I had leaned in to offer a word of condolence. Putting my hand lightly on his back I felt the sharpness of his shoulder blade hard on my palm through the thinness of the cloth. I was shocked at how frail and exposed he suddenly seemed.

A few dozen of us from the church and village were gathered in the kitchen of the family farm-house that belonged now to Howard's son and family. Years earlier Howard and his wife had retired to town from farming, and now we were just back from the cemetery where we had joined in committing his wife's body to the ground. As he and I connected near the kitchen table, this jacket he wore every Sunday to worship now seemed woefully inadequate to protect him—and maybe me—from the loneliness and grief he felt at her passing.

I don't know if Howard felt vulnerable and unprotected. But I did. I was his pastor, shepherd to the flock in which he was a leading member. It was my first pastoral charge and I worked hard at weekly worship and Bible study, pastoral visits, and meetings with the Board of Deacons. I was piecing together pastoral ministry with all the appropriate and expected rites, rituals, doctrines, practices and affirmations of faith.

At the funeral service for Howard's wife I said and did all the correct things, and helped the others say and do all they needed, and expected, as well. But now as I stood by Howard's side and felt the fragile frame of his life so exposed and unprotected, I was not at all sure of the adequacy of any of that. I was embarrassed by the intimacy of his vulnerability. I feared the immensity and irreversibility of his loss. I felt inadequate to the task of bringing meaningful comfort.

The rites and rituals, doctrines and affirmations, and learned counselling responses and techniques seemed like so many fig leaves I

had picked up along the way to cover my nakedness. Not sufficient to help me or anyone else feel truly covered and safe. One thing I struggled with then, and struggle with still, is the habit, long-practised, of seeking to cover my nakedness. For fear of being truly seen. For lack of trust in (or experience in waiting for, asking for, and receiving?) the more helpful and gracious covering God has for me, when I am willing not to hide.

I don't think this was an issue for Howard. I have every confidence that when he felt naked, afraid, vulnerable, or lost, he turned to his Bible, prayed to God, trusted in his Saviour, and knew himself clothed again in the grace of God's good will and purpose. And then for him all the rites and rituals, doctrines and affirmations of faith were not so much stitched-together covering, as they were the honest movements and commitments of a man both naked to, and clothed by, his God.

It was I, the minister, who had yet to learn that art, and that saving way of real faith. Not to be so anxious to find fig leaves along the way. To see that pastoral ministry itself might very well be a particular forest of trees in which I was hoping to hide from God—and from my own fears of inadequacy and brokenness, sinfulness and unworthiness.

I like to think now that it must have been soon after that encounter with our vulnerability that I signed up for my first-ever week-long directed prayer retreat. Against my anxieties at the thought of it, I agreed for that week to put myself, my story, my struggles and my nakedness into the hands of a spiritual director—someone who helped me hear that terrible saving question, “Where are you?”

And then when I came out from hiding, my director helped me let go of my stitched-together fig leaves for the sake of something much more adequate—more adequate to my calling, through being more adequate to my own deepest well-being.

Brian Donst began life and ministry as a Baptist, and, through a variety of ministries gradually migrated into The United Church of Canada, and is currently serving Fifty United, Winona ON. He trusts that at some point the wandering—vocational and personal—will prove to be a journey; maybe even a pilgrimage. bdonst53@gmail.com

AMAZING GRACE

by Alf Dumont

*Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

During one of the consultations of Indigenous people in The United Church of Canada, after we went silent for over an hour, Gladys Taylor began to sing *Amazing Grace*. The voice of one of our elders brought us back together to focus on why we had gathered.

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come.
'Tis Grace hath brought me safe thus far
And Grace will lead me home.*

As we shared around the circle, we would listen to the stories from different Indigenous church communities across this country: stories from the people of Giwaydin - the north; stories from the people of Niiggabeun - the west; stories from the people of Wabun - the east; and stories from the people of Zhawan - the south. We heard stories of struggle, of pain, of support, of hope, and of respect.

*The Lord has promised good to me.
His Word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.*

Our Elder Gladys was deeply involved in her church and was always profoundly moved when we, as a community, shared bread and wine together. Our Elder Gladys also carried the traditional teachings from her elders. She lifted the smoke from her pipe to the Thunder Beings and gave thanks, saying, “Meegwetch” when the Thunders sang in the skies above.

Gladys often sat quietly, as elders do, when we discussed future directions. In those moments, we wrestled with how to carry Christian teachings and traditional teachings: how to carry, with respect, the cross and the pipe, to honor the teachings of Scripture from the ancient Middle East and the teachings written on ancient birch bark scrolls of North America. There were moments when we lost our voices, and moments

when we lost our focus. That day, Gladys broke the silence, quietly singing, *Amazing Grace*. In that meeting and in the many meetings that followed that day, we blended our voices with hers.

*When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.*

Alf Dumont's *From the Other Side of the River*, forthcoming from the United Church Publishing House, 2020, is a book reflecting Alf's journey in life, carrying Christian and traditional teachings, and the wrestling that comes with identity as he was blessed with Anishinaabe, Irish, French, and English heritage. www.ucrdstore.ca

MAKING OUT ALL RIGHT

by Rob Fennell

When I was first ordained and settled in rural Saskatchewan, I was twenty-four years of age—the youngest age possible at the time, unless one managed to skip a grade of school. I was young, naïve, and confident as a peacock. But I was sensitive about the possibility that my clerical credibility might be negatively affected by my youthful appearance. I was also predisposed to defensiveness as the youngest of four children. I remembered my father telling me that, when he was first ordained in 1957 (also at age twenty-four), he walked into a local hardware store and the owner asked him if he was starting high school in the town.

Without thinking it through very clearly, I decided to grow a beard before I arrived on the charge. It was a thick, red, bushy beard that grew straight out at right angles from my face. One colleague said it reminded her of Grizzly Adams of 1970s TV fame. I was pleased with my beardedly power.

A few months went by, and everything seemed well on the charge as we all got to know one another. I had four points in the countryside, each with its distinctive history, charm, and need. I drove about 100 kms. every Sunday morning for worship services. I had my hands full with preparing and leading worship, many meetings, a small youth group and youth choir, occasional Bible studies, lots of pastoral visiting, some reading, and learning the ropes of the pastoral life.

By mid-winter that first year, my glorious beard was shaggy as a

sheepdog and *fantastically* itchy. It was driving me around the bend. So, one Saturday morning, I shaved it off, exposing my youthful visage and liberating my skin from The Itch. That evening, I went to the community hall for a dessert auction—a fundraiser for the pastoral charge. I had my eye on a cherry pie (my favourite). There were several cherry pies on offer, but I was outbid on all of them by my more generous parishioners. However, since part of the evening’s fun was not only to buy dessert, but also to sit down and enjoy it, various folk felt sorry for me, and brought over three pieces of pie from their own successful bids. As my grandmother would say, “I made out all right.”

So there I was, delightedly stuffing myself with pie, chatting up the neighbours, and forgetting about my clean-shaven appearance. However, halfway through my second piece of pie, Eddy sat down across from me. Eddy was a local bachelor farmer, about seventy years of age, gruff, quiet, with not an ounce of guile or subtlety in him. He farmed alone and lived alone in the half of his small house that had not burned down a few years earlier. As his neighbours said of him, with great affection, he was “quite the Eddy.” Eddy announced, “You look like a g-damned ten year old kid.”

I flushed and felt all my inadequacies and defensiveness rise and rage. I was ready to hurl my third piece at Eddy, but then remembered it was cherry pie and I didn’t want to waste it. Instead, I swallowed my mouthful and replied, “Can I still be your minister, Eddy?” He snorted. In the end, Eddy let me be his minister. The pastoral charge didn’t send me away. I continued to work out my suppressed insecurities and anxieties, and, I hope, grew up a little more.

Settlement charges are now a thing of the past in The United Church of Canada, but I do wish sometimes for those days, when there was forgiveness for my greenness, room to grow and make mistakes, cherry pie, and bachelor farmers. I gave them a hard time and they teased me back, and we grew to love each other. By the grace of God and the kindness of those faithful rural disciples of Jesus, pastor and people “made out all right.”

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APPLIED THEOLOGY WHEN I'VE RUN OUT OF PATIENCE by Maggie Watts-Hammond

"I can't stand up," Bob says. "Can you get Hans (the custodian) to help me up? So I can walk home." Around us, people clear tables from our weekly community meal. Bob comes often, shares his music and talks about God. "Bob, how will you walk home if you can't stand up? I think we need to call the ambulance."

"No, no." He tries to push himself forward but his legs won't move. I call over a retired nurse who is clearing plates. "Nancy, can you check on Bob, he can't . . ."

"So, Pastor, when are we going to have that talk about Gog and Magog? I think you're avoiding me." This was true. Alan usually wants to talk about things I'm not ready for, at the most inconvenient times. He's decided Trump will save North America. I don't want to talk about that either.

"Not right now, Alan. I have to call an ambulance for Bob." "After you've called, will you have time?" "No, Alan, not today."

"*Police, fire or ambulance,*" asks 911. I turn away to talk to the operator.

"Maggie, can I talk to you?"

"*You say he can't walk. How did he get there?*"

"He walked." "Not right now, Patrick." to the man who'd approached me: "Maybe next week."

"I might not be here next week. I think I'm going to end it all."

"*Are you still there?*"

"Ummmm, uh. He can't stand up, and we need an ambulance. Patrick, can you wait for me right there on the pew until I've called the ambulance for Bob?" "I guess." He sits.

"*If he's breathing ok and he's still conscious and talking, it may be a few minutes; we're busy.*" The operator is apologizing.

Bob is agitated. He is breathing rapidly. Hans wants to try to get Bob on his feet so he can try to walk home. The nurse and I say "NO! If he can't stand by himself, he can't walk home."

Still no ambulance. I step out into the afternoon sun in time to hear a rending, screeching crash. There's shouting. Three cars have crashed in the middle of the intersection. We can't even tell which direction they came from. My phone rings. It's 911. "*We're going to be a little longer. There's a bad accident just happened on the corner of Number 1 Road.*" "Yes, I know."

Back inside I'm accosted by the "man with no name." He's told

us many names. An outspoken racist, he loves to argue. He's angry because before the meal we pray in both English and Mandarin. He's holding a copy of The United Church of Canada Act to prove that it's illegal for us to pray in Mandarin! He's underlined the relevant bits for me.

I lose my patience. "Enough!" I say. "I don't worship a racist, misogynistic, hateful God. I don't have time for this today." I push past him as he calls after me. "I'm just trying to preserve the historic traditions of the white race and the United Church!"

In my moments of darkness, I tend to think he's right—about the historic traditions of the United Church. I check on Patrick.

"I should just quit. Gary says I'm, I'm, I'm useless. He says he doesn't have to pay me back and . . ." Gary and Patrick have been best friends for years. Both have cognitive and physical impairments. "What about your wife?" I ask. "You aren't useless to her or your family. You know when Gary's down he gets like this." Patrick often forgets to drink; so I get him water, and ask him to stay and think when . . .

Hans interrupts, "Bob says his arms hurt. He's having trouble breathing." I dial 911 and walk towards Bob. 911 assures me that an ambulance has been dispatched.

The "man with no name" is waving papers at me and shouting about prayer. People are heading up the stairs to the AA meeting. Two men get between us and ask the man if he'd like to join AA. This is for sure the best intervention ever. He snarls and heads to his car. He sometimes boasts he has multiple prosecutions for fraud. It's a nice car.

Bob is weepy when paramedics arrive. Blood pressure taken and concerns noted, they lift him expertly to the stretcher. I walk with them to the street, where Bob says: "Now I'm down on the street, just get my shoes on my feet and I'll walk home. I'll be fine."

A paramedic shakes his head. "You're not fine till the doctor says you're fine. Enjoy the ride!"

"I'll come see you," I promise.

Patrick is waiting at the front door. "I feel kinda better." "Shall we stop and pray?" I ask. We pray on the steps and I ask a blessing on him. I ask, "Could you bless me too?" He says a beautiful, stuttering prayer, asking God to help me and look after me. "See you next week," he says.

All this happened on the same day about a year ago, Yes, within one, forty-five minute period. Bob is out of hospital, still struggling. Patrick and Gary have made up. Alan wants to talk about the Angel of Death. The "man with no name" has a new car. We still pray in two

languages. Most names have been changed.

I felt fully called to the ministry that was before me that day, and am in awe at the blessing I was offered. I believe we helped Bob, and supported Patrick. I continue to have theological conversations with Alan. But applied theology is putting into action the idea that Jesus knows the name of the man with no name. I can call an ambulance, get a glass of water, and talk with a lonely man. But there are days I can't even speak civilly to a man who won't tell us his name. Ministry is one thing. Being a Christian is harder.

Maggie Watts-Hammond is in ministry at Gilmore Park United Church in Richmond BC, a diverse community in which 60 percent of residents list Mandarin as their first language. She recently spent time with the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland where the phrase “We are made of stories” is carved into the wall, and where story-telling and listening is seen as a way of peace. revmaggie@gilmoreparkunited.ca

THE BENT WOMAN: A STORY OF HEALING AND RESTORATION

by Nancy E. Hardy

The story of Jesus and the bent woman (Luke 13:10-17) has always had particular resonance for me, because sometimes that how's I feel—bent over, burdened down. We're not told much about the woman, except that she was a widow and had been bent over “with a spirit that crippled her” for eighteen years. We know from Scripture and literature what the fate of widows was like in Jesus' time: poor, powerless, dependent on charity, viewed as worthless for the most part. We can imagine the circumstances that bent the woman over, and know that to be touched by Jesus (a taboo in that culture) and called a child of Abraham would have been truly liberating and healing.

The story has always intrigued me, because it speaks to many people in the world who are bent over from grief, loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety, poverty. As well, the burdens of war, climate change, and violence surround us on a daily basis, and too often make us feel both pessimistic and lethargic.

I met a bent woman during my early years in pastoral ministry. I first encountered her on the telephone. “Is this the Reverend Hardy?” a thin hesitant voice enquired. “I saw an announcement in the church program last Sunday about how you were having classes for people who

would like to become members of the church. And I've always wanted to belong to the church and I've never been baptised and I want to come and I . . ." She stopped for a breath, and I said, "Slow down a bit. What did you say your name is?"

"My name is Connie, and they told me that I'm not smart enough to belong to the church. There's something wrong with my head and I don't think very good, and I . . ." Well, of course I told Connie she was welcome at the membership classes. And, of course, I told her that it didn't matter how smart she was, or whether she had been sick as a child. But when she came to the class the following Saturday, it was as if she didn't believe me.

Because, at the beginning, Connie seemed like a bent woman. She was a woman in her early fifties, short, with reddish hair, and a childlike voice that ended every sentence with a question. She hesitated at the doorway of the meeting room, and then, without looking up at anyone, scuttled to a seat. But Connie attended the classes faithfully, gradually becoming more comfortable with the conversation. She was baptized and confirmed on Easter Eve. And when I gave her the Christ candle and said, "Jesus Christ is the light of the world—walk in his way," her whole face shone, and she stood up straight, and I knew she had been raised in Christ. She believed that she was beloved by God and worthy of anything life would offer her.

I left that church shortly after her baptism, and when I was about to move out of my office, she appeared with a small standing plaque that I still cherish. It says, "If I could give you, my friend, the ability to see yourself as I see you . . . then you would realize what a truly special friend you are to me."

I'm sad to say that I never kept in touch with Connie. I like to think that for Connie, baptism and confirmation raised her up and brought her freedom from her sense of inadequacy. Her shining face on Easter Eve certainly did that for me. The Gospel of John says that Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). The gift of abundant life offers freedom from our burdens and enables us to stand up straight. Thank God for this gift of liberation!

Nancy Hardy is a United Church pensioner living in Toronto. She has had a varied career in the United Church, including twenty years of pastoral ministry in New Brunswick and Southern Ontario. She is the author of *Worship in the City*, a collection of prayers, songs, and reflections for urban dwellers. hardyplant@sympatico.ca

EVERYDAY HOSPITALITY**by Beth Hayward**

One dreary afternoon, weeks after arriving at my first pastorate, I found myself gathered round the septic tank on the front yard of the manse with a rugged group of white-haired men as they tried to determine who was at fault for my backed-up toilet. Having grown up in the suburbs, this was my first septic tank experience and I waited nervously to hear their verdict. It was determined that the tank had reached its life span, but, because it is our human tendency to place blame, I received a stern warning to stop pouring bacon fat down the drain. Little did they know that I'd been living on a steady diet of Kraft Dinner and canned soup. Unsure which was worse, being falsely accused or admitting that I didn't actually know how to cook, I kept silent.

In time the group of gruff men and I became friendly, and things started to look up for my diet. I'd go so far as to say that the food, provided by many in my congregations, saved me and nurtured my body and soul during the two years I spent in Newfoundland.

I don't know if word got around about my cooking skills. I had been warned that I would be watched if I entered the liquor store, but I wondered whether people actually were more interested in my grocery cart. Whatever the reason, my pantry was soon filled with bottled rabbit, jam, and pickles, while dinner invitations flowed.

Hospitality is of course a Christian imperative but that doesn't mean we always get it right. You can open the Scriptures in nearly any place and find stories like Sarah preparing bread and lamb for the strangers at her tent, or Martha and Mary hosting a tender evening meal in their home, or overflowing baskets of fish and bread shared on a hillside. Some people say that the Christian practice of hospitality has been essentially lost. "By the eighteenth century, the term 'hospitality' had been emptied of its central moral meaning and left only with its late-medieval trappings of luxury and indulgence."² Today hospitality is often reduced to the warm welcome we extend to those we know and love. But in my first pastorate I experienced the reality of a church and a people with a deeply imbedded heart for hospitality.

The meals and canned goods were always a welcome gift but there was one type of invitation that humbles me to this day. There were many nights I was invited, not for a special meal but for an ordinary one:

² Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 38.

a midweek meal where the menu wasn't planned with me in mind and vacuuming wasn't considered a prerequisite for my inclusion. Those kinds of invitations leave you feeling like you belong to family rather than being a favoured guest. Those types of invitations leave you feeling that you are at the table because the host is glad to have you, not because they feel obliged. Those are the times I felt deep, raw, full, satisfying welcome, not as the stranger to be loved but the family to be fed.

There are many moments in the church when I've wondered why it seems like such a struggle to get a group of people to consistently behave with a generous Christian spirit. When that negativity starts seeping in, I remember my people, as I fondly call them to this day, my people in Newfoundland. They took in this come-from-away, led me to their steamy kitchens, pulled up a chair, brushed aside the children's homework books and welcomed me to their everyday table.

As my family has grown, we've done our part to be a people who extend a place at the table on ordinary nights because I've learned firsthand the impact of deep-hearted hospitality. All these years later it continues to inform and challenge me to grow deeper in my understanding and expression of Christian hospitality.

I wonder if the pastorate that first took root beside the septic tank might have even more to teach me than I ever imagined. As I consider an appropriate Christian response to the greatest challenge of our time, climate change, I go way back to H. Richard Niebuhr who once queried: "Who finally is my neighbor, the companion whom I have been commanded to love as myself? . . . My neighbor is animal and inorganic being . . . all that participates in being."³ I wonder if everyday dinner hospitality might be extended to *all creation* as it was to me all those years ago. Maybe we've still got a lot to learn from gruff guys who gather around septic tanks.

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³ Quoted in Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 200.

MANAGE THE DECLINE OR LET THE LIGHT SHINE?

by Orville James

He was a denominational executive for the Methodist Church in England. I was serving a “circuit” of seven little congregations during a ten-week exchange.

At the time, in that region of southern England (twenty miles from the newly opened “Chunnel” to France), the economy was booming, construction everywhere, population expanding. But the village churches were declining, seemingly terminally. Most Sundays I would preach at three different services, to a grand total of some twenty-five elderly souls.

So over lunch with the regional Superintendent, I expressed my distress at the frailty, and insular mindset of the tiny congregations I was serving. I was hoping we could talk about renewal and growth, outreach and evangelism.

That was not on his agenda, or in his vocabulary. Instead, he shrugged resignedly, then spoke mechanically about “managing the decline” with amalgamations and closures.

I took my deflated enthusiasm into London for an interview with Leslie Griffith, minister of Wesley’s Chapel, the flagship congregation of Methodism. He is also Lord Griffith, named to the House of Lords by Tony Blair as a Christian voice into the Houses of Parliament. I asked him “What is the greatest challenge for the church in Britain right now?”

Fifteen years later I can still see and hear his energy as he leaned toward me to declare: “The gospel still works!! But we’ve lost our faith in proclamation and witness!” Then he began to cast a vision of a church that is passionate about social action and justice, while also declaring faith in the living Christ in a winsome and respectful way. Within the hour my spirit was renewed. We adjourned a few steps up City Road to his “local” (pub), and Leslie and his wife Margaret regaled me with stories of their ten years of ministry in Haiti.

I have reflected on those two conversations many times. One with a denominational executive, a good man, yet lacking vision, and content to administer and manage the long, slow decline of Christ’s church in his territory. The other with a passionate parish preacher, who had served urban congregations, and on the mission field, and who still carried a “fire in the belly” for the gospel of Jesus Christ, which, when properly proclaimed, changes individual lives, communities, and entire societies. My sense is that, in the next decade, our mainline Protestant churches desperately need the latter voice, calling for healthy evangelism

to set the agenda.

This mindset toward winsome witness is all over the New Testament. The Apostles Peter and John left Jerusalem to proclaim the gospel to villages in Samaria (Acts 8:25). The Apostle Paul spoke of “becoming all things to all people in order that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22, NRSV). The first letter of Peter declares: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect . . .” (1 Pet 3:15, NIV). For some reason, the mainline church in our time has not made that mandate a priority.

What is holding us back? Reflecting on my conversations with British church leaders I have questions and theories. Might it be that the bureaucrats’ view is too focused on oversight of the church as it presently exists, rather than envisioning the spiritual movements that Jesus’ team could ignite? Quite understandably, denominational leaders react to trends and patterns unfolding in the organization that is already in place. So when any change is contemplated, it will, unsurprisingly, be focused on transforming the organizational structure. In contrast, local pastors, the “boots on the ground,” are more likely to focus on the spiritual health of individuals. Somehow, that alters their ministry agenda and goals.

With the “up close and personal” relationship, congregational ministers are constantly made aware of the spiritual hunger of their neighbours, and the wandering search of so many millennials, and the jarring fear and anger of so many “unchurched” people, who want to believe in God, but have been burned or bored by their experience of the church.

I believe the United Church is the best positioned denomination to reach out to the many diverse groups in Canada. We are already known for living a spiritual lifestyle rooted in abounding grace and radiating out toward social justice.

So those of us on Jesus’ team ought to reclaim the New Testament agenda, calling for joyful, gentle witness for the abiding love of God, shown in Jesus Christ. Let us return to Proclamation as the primary task of the Church for the generation ahead.

Orville James has just completed forty years of ordained ministry, most recently at Wellington Square United Church in Burlington, ON. He now lives in Kitchener, and considers himself a “free agent” for Jesus. orvjames@gmail.com

CHAPEL AS WORKSHOP

by Wendy Kean

They gathered carefully, even a little fearfully, sitting on the edge of the pews, each of them avoiding the other. They were known to each other, but in this sacred and unfamiliar place, they did not know how to talk with each other the way they did on the hangar floor or in the workshop or the canteen.

The Warrant Officer strode in, to round them up and hustle them out the door. There, in the parking lot, the practice coffin from the Base Chief's office waited for them. They were sized and marched over to lift it out of the truck, and then to carry it into the chapel, up the aisle, and position it properly at the bottom of the chancel steps. The casket banged against the chapel doors on the first few runs, but they got the hang of it and soon were able to complete the whole move without error.

Next, a Canadian flag was produced and given to the Warrant. With an assistant from the Base Chief's office, they began rehearsing the steps of unfolding it, draping it over the coffin, placing the medals and beret, then removing them and refolding the flag, first with the words of command said aloud, next with the words whispered, then, finally, in silence, taking direction from the Warrant's eyes alone. As they grew in confidence and skill, the flag ceased to be an object to be wrestled into place and shape, but became an expression of respect as they moved in unison in the ballet of respect and grief.

The next day, in another chapel in another town, they did honour to their Sergeant in front of his family, his friends, and his squadron, their movements gentle and precise, their faces clean of tears and apprehension. As the Squadron Commanding Officer took the flag from the Warrant Officer to present to the family, the Warrant looked briefly in my direction. I smiled. They had done their duty to their Sergeant beautifully, respectfully, and with grace.

The chapels of the Canadian Armed Forces serve a number of purposes, similar to civilian places of worship. Along with the rituals and traditions found in other sacred space, they serve as spaces of ceremonial and as keepers of memorials to military service and sacrifice. Three Sundays a year—Battle of the Atlantic in May, Battle of Britain in September, and Remembrance Sunday in November—pipers and trumpeters, flags and uniforms come out to worship services to honour those who served and died in wars past. Many chapels have stained glass windows, some to honour individuals, but many more to mark the

presence on that base of units, squadrons, and regiments. A Book of Remembrance is also kept there, updated regularly with the names and dates of those killed on mission. In some chapels, one page of that Book is turned every day and the dead prayed for.

Chapels are as full at worship as they are in the civilian community. And like civilian places of worship, the congregation swells for weddings, funerals, and memorial services. What sets them apart is the role the chapel plays in rehearsing the ceremonial of military funerals. A full military funeral has the same level of importance as a parade: the standard of dress is high, special drill movements need to be rehearsed, and while some may be volunteers in the strictest sense, the expectation of participation by the members of the unit of the deceased is high and is considered a matter of honour. For those who served in the flag party of their Sergeant, they strove to excel at performing the required drill movements not only because it was expected, but also because it was an outlet for their grief.

Those aviators came to the Wing Chapel to learn flag drill and how to move the casket in the required way. They were young and in an unfamiliar place, both in the chapel and in preparing to bury their supervisor. They watched me get the place ready for them and their work as they whispered nervously with each other: they were awkward, unsure of where to put their headdress, their jackets, their arms, their legs; of what to say; of how to interact with me outside of their workplace, even though they knew me as their chaplain. But as they began wrestling with the casket and the flag, and learned to move in harmony without words of direction, the chapel became something else: a place to practise acts of ultimate importance, and to imagine someone else doing these things for them.

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AND SO IT IS WITH THE SPIRIT **by Hallett Llewellyn**

As a child, I remember sitting with my parents in a one-room country church during the ritual of the Lord's Supper. The silver-coated plate with tiny white cubes of bread was being passed in the pews. As I reached up to take a cube, my hand was quickly drawn back by my father. His finger, waving back and forth, reminded me that this is for adults only. It made

no sense to me. At home, when meals were served, there was no exclusion from the table because I was a child. Why such exclusion in the church? The incongruity of that experience remained with me for a long time. It still does.

Fast forward to pastoral ministry days in a city congregation. As tradition would have it, children were not allowed to participate in the Communion ritual. The debate as to why was longstanding in the congregation, and it continued during our time. One man, whose history carried some weight of influence, was opposed to children's participation on the grounds that confession of faith and capacity to understand were key border protectors, neither of which in his opinion were within a child's capacity. He was not alone in his reasoning. Over the years, Calvin and the Reformed heritage have been cited in defence of such a position. As one of the paid, accountable ministers, I was not in agreement with his stance. This was a point of contention that at times was relationally stressful.

It was Maundy Thursday worship and naturally my family, including two children, was present. The numbers were small and with some urging, we shared the bread and wine gathered informally around the Communion table, one cup and one loaf. The invitation to come forward did not differentiate between adult and child, and so my children were two of the twelve people in the circle. With some concern, we noticed that one daughter, only five years of age, stood beside the man who on more than one occasion had sanctioned her exclusion. Now what? Appearance notwithstanding, this was not on our part some plotted pastoral subterfuge to undermine the authority of the Session. Was it happenstance or something more profound?

The words of institution were spoken, and the elements were on their way around the circle. The loaf came to our daughter. Unsure of her movement, she broke from the loaf and ate it. And then, with eyes fixed firmly on the man beside her, she passed him the loaf with the words: *the body of Christ broken for you*. We were not alone in amazement of what happened next. His eyes met hers and then the tears began to flow, the lips trembled, and the words of response tumbled from his mouth, *Thanks be to God*. In an instant, exclusion gave way to inclusion, and reason was tempered by Spirit in a way that had transforming consequences. The man in question had a change of heart and Communion celebration was never the same in that faith community.

As with most things, there are causal or natural factors to explain a sudden change of heart and mind, and one would not be hard pressed to describe this Communion occasion in psychological terms. In retrospect,

I turn to the language of faith to declare the efficacy of what happened. “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). As a faith community, The United Church of Canada believes in the power of the Holy Spirit to effect change beyond human understanding. A *Song of Faith*⁴ begins with affirmation of God as Spirit “who from the beginning has swept over the face of creation, animating all energy and matter and moving in the human heart.” In reference to the Communion table the *Song of Faith* sings of “the shining promise of barriers broken and creation healed.”

Even John Calvin, as much as we may cite him in defence of good order and reasoned faith, had a sense of the mystical presence of God which was beyond human knowledge to grasp. Some would argue that for Calvin the human heart and experience were key factors when speaking of God’s presence in Communion.⁵

Faith practices and policies are shaped and formed in congregations mostly with sound reason and after considerable theological and biblical reflection. Such was the case for us in this instance. That was the second movement of change however. The first was the experience itself when a young child and an elder in the community encountered one another in the sacramental presence of bread and wine. As *Song of Faith* says:

*God is Holy Mystery,
beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description . . .
Grateful for God’s loving action,
We cannot keep from singing.*

Hallett Llewellyn is a retired United Church of Canada minister now living in Nova Scotia. During his ministry days he served several pastoral charges in Ontario, worked in the General Council Office, and was Principal of Queen's Theological College. hlllewellyn@bellaliant.net

⁴ A *Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada*, 2006.

⁵ Claudio Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization: Redrawing the Borders of Eucharistic Hospitality* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 113-115.

AN EPIPHANY ON CHRISTMAS EVE

by Ross Lockhart

My wiper blades scraped against the icy windshield that sparkled like a disco ball, as the car drove past inflated reindeer dotting the front yards in our small northwestern Ontario community of Dryden. The snow was falling gently as I made my way down quiet streets to the local hospital. It was Christmas Eve. In just a few hours the church would celebrate Christmas in the shadow of the devastating layoffs at the local pulp and paper mill. Unemployment coupled with ongoing economic uncertainty made it difficult for many to “Deck the Halls with boughs of holly” even though “‘Tis the season to be jolly.” Even our town mascot “Max the Moose” looked a little forlorn in the deep, dark cold of winter, standing alone on Highway 17, his big eyes and silly antlers pleading for someone to stop and lend a hand. No, for many in this one-industry town, Christmas would have a decidedly low-key feel that year. As I went about my preparations for the services that evening, I had one more stop to make.

The parking lot at the hospital was almost empty by 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve. I stepped out of the car and crossed over icy ruts where cars were parked earlier, oil leaks mixing with fresh snow, leaving dark smudges on Creation’s canvas. Through the swirl of snowflakes, a giant, pale blue H was illuminated in the distance and a sign as bright red as Rudolph’s nose declaring “Emergency” was just a few short steps away. The electronic doors opened with a “swoosh” as I strolled through the empty waiting room, pausing for my usual chat at the nurse’s station, while I checked the roll of patient names in hospital. A singing Santa was perched on the countertop beside hand sanitizer, coffee cups, and medical charts. The next hour was spent going from room to room, passing out candy canes and making sure that those who could not be in church were comforted and remembered. Mindful of the time and needing to get back in time to open the church doors and crank up the heat, I paid one last visit to a quiet corner room where one of our long-time members was losing a battle with cancer.

Several Christmas cards dotted the walls and a small poinsettia plant was perched awkwardly on the windowsill. “Merry Christmas!” I said as I walked into the room and pulled up a chair at the bedside. “So it is!” said the congregation member with a warm smile on her face. After a brief discussion regarding her latest medical tests, she moved the conversation back to the holiday. “This will be my last Christmas,” she said with a hint of resignation. We sat in silence for a while. “All those

Christmases gone by are dear to me, you know,” she said with determination. “Tell me about them,” I replied. For the next few minutes we traced her life history from early years through marriage and raising a family to widowhood and these final days. “Rev. Ross,” she paused as the wave of memory rolled over her, “this year I need Christmas more than ever . . . I need to know that a baby’s cry will be heard tonight and that I can trust God in the uncertain road ahead.” She shifted her weight uneasily in the hospital bed and said, “Even like this, I am still ready to celebrate Christmas, you know. I am sorry that I can’t be in church tonight—I’m going to miss the carols especially.” “Which carol is your favourite?” I asked, glimpsing the setting sun through the frosted hospital windowpane and disappearing beneath the horizon. “Joy to the World!” she replied eagerly. And then in a move I did not expect she asked, “Would you sing it for me?” My first thought was that I was glad it was a private room! “Sure,” I replied, stalling in an attempt to remember all the verses. Clearing my throat, I began the familiar words:

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
Let ev’ry heart prepare Him room, and heav’n and nature sing.*

By the time I reached, “He rules the world with truth and grace” both of us were singing in hushed voices, tears welling up in her eyes. There was nothing more that we needed to say. I placed a candy cane on her side table, kissed her on the forehead and walked out of the room. I can still remember the sound as my feet moved from the squeaking polish of the hospital floor to the crunch of snow on the sidewalk outside. I kept whispering on trembling lips as if in a prayer, “The glories of His righteousness, and the wonders of His love.”

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LEARNING GRATITUDE THE HARD WAY—FROM GRASSHOPPERS

by Elizabeth Macdonald

The summer of 1985 was hot and sunny, not a cloud in the sky—perfect weather for a cross-country drive all the way from downtown Toronto in southern Ontario to almost-a-town Melita in southwestern Manitoba. I was a well-educated, well-equipped ordinand, ready for any and all challenges in my settlement charge—except for the challenge that began

to emerge just days after I arrived.

I was in the midst of unpacking when the phone rang. A member of the congregation had died. We organized the funeral for the following week. I wasn't too concerned about the service, having assisted at several already. But I had never actually participated in a committal service. As it turned out nothing in any class or field placement or internship prepared me for what happened at that committal.

Within seconds of gathering around the open grave in that flat, wide-open, prairie cemetery, my alb—from neck to ankle, from shoulder to wrist—was covered in grasshoppers. Almost as if in some mysterious way they understood what was going on, they did not jump or fly about. They clung to my alb, to me, for the duration of the committal. I still don't know how I managed to get through the service. I suspect it was pure shock.

Being an utterly urban person not yet attuned to the natural world, I hadn't noticed the swarms of grasshoppers everywhere, on all the yards, in all the fields. I hadn't yet made the connection between hot, sunny dry weather and their raucous, ravenous presence. And I hadn't begun to imagine, much less comprehend, the consequences for my new parishioners and neighbours.

But there was no missing the furrowed brows and worried eyes looking out from the pews, or the subdued conversations on Sunday morning, or the news stories about lower yields and poorer grades of grain as summer gave way to fall. It didn't take too many pastoral visits to learn just how hard Manitoba farmers had to work even in a good year, and how no farm family could survive without somebody bringing in off-farm income.

This seemed so unjust—especially to someone who had grown up among autoworkers in Windsor, Ontario, and fervently believed in the basic human rights of just wages, equal pay for equal work, health care, and other benefits. Those first few weeks on my settlement charge with the hot dry weather and grasshoppers challenged everything I thought I knew about labour economics, economic justice from a faith perspective . . . and Thanksgiving.

I started worrying about Thanksgiving Sunday by mid-September. I began searching worship resources for Thanksgiving prayers and litanies that didn't use words like "bounty" or "blessing." I looked for alternate, more "appropriate-for-this-year" lyrics for familiar tunes like "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come" or "We Plough the Fields and Scatter." I had no idea where to begin on a Thanksgiving sermon. It finally dawned on me: "Maybe this year we should cancel

Thanksgiving.”

That’s the idea I brought to the worship planning team. Shocking as grasshoppers at graveside was, even more shocking was the reaction of those lay worship planners. They were horrified and outraged. “Cancel Thanksgiving? Are you out of your mind? Can’t you see? Don’t you understand just how much we have to be grateful for?”

They explained (yes, with some exasperation) that this wasn’t the first or worst poor harvest season that they had faced. They described what it meant to come to church with friends and neighbours, to sing hymns and hear Scripture that reassured them of God’s healing presence in rough times. They spoke of trusting the power of love to bring life out of death. They talked proudly about being “next year” people, as deeply rooted in hope as they were in the Manitoba soil they farmed.

As I listened, I began to see these lay people incarnating gratitude in ways I had never experienced: gratitude that persists in the face of what is unjust; gratitude that outlasts disappointment and despair; gratitude that is a daily spiritual practice both in personal and shared church life.

That worship committee meeting didn’t change the poor harvest that fall or the worsening farm crisis that followed. We would go on to address that crisis in many ways—crying, raging, and working together to alleviate hardship and suffering in the community and beyond.

That worship team did change my mind and stretch my heart. By the end of the meeting it was decided: there would be a Thanksgiving service! On October 13, 1985 we celebrated Thanksgiving with the conviction and confidence of Christians who know and trust God is good, and that God’s love endures forever. And I learned about gratitude from grateful people and grasshoppers!

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HOLDING ON AND BEING HELD

by Bruce McLeod

One benefit of passing ninety is remembering further back than most people (1940 Maple Leafs, anyone?). Outwardly unremarkable events of long ago can be savoured again, learned from, and rescued from pits of forgottenness in our constantly updating world.

So, come with me sixty years back to my beginning church in a

village beside Georgian Bay. Fresh from a famous seminary, my head was jammed with speculation on surrounding mystery from earnest theologians and scholars. It was also equally short of wisdom that only unfolding experience in God's world can bring.

In my first December, the Christmas Concert was (where else?) right in the sanctuary. Brave recitations on the festooned platform included a little girl (hopefully, now a forgetful 64) announcing tearfully that she'd wet her pants. Child angels bent over a manger regardless. O Little Town and Silent Night modulated magically into Rudolf and Frosty, who raised the roof. At last, long awaited jingling, a mighty knock, a manic "Ho Ho", and Santa was finally there.

But, at once, a discordant note: the Provincial Police were at the door, plucking the new minister from laughter and light, to tell a woman old enough to be his mother that her husband, caught in a collision, was dead.

I still hear my knuckles on her door. Every year her bright face is there again—the welcoming smile, the supper table set for two, the flashing light of the police car, the callow young cleric, the quickly ashen-faced woman sensing the worst. Once again, the sweat on my palms, the wondering what to say—What words would be neither trite, nor intrusive?

Did I reach out my arms? Probably not, given age/gender difference and inherent reserve. But maybe I did. Or, perhaps her arms moved first. Or, were we both nudged by a kind Presence abroad that night? Whatever, we found ourselves holding on to each other for dear life.

And at that moment I knew—like a burden lifted—that nothing needed to be said at all. It was enough to be there, holding on and being held. It would be ten years before the United Church officially declared, "We are not alone. We live in God's world."⁶ That night, long before I learned them, I knew the words were true.

For there were stronger arms than ours on that bleak porch. An encompassing Presence, we knew, was "with us in trouble" (cf. Psalm 91:14) there, feeling the pain before we did, our tears on its face before we wept.

We were holding on, and not just to each other. We were being held, held fast by Love. This Love, I realized later, comes after us in our far country, as Jesus came to tell of the running father (Luke 15:11-32).

⁶ "A New Creed," The United Church of Canada, 1968.

That same Love hovered over chaos from the beginning (cf. Genesis 1:2b) and, like that chaos, has never been erased. It “bears all things”—bears us! (1Cor 13:7) It holds us fast, and never lets us go.

I’d heard hints of such astounding news in books and lectures, but not until this night did it find lodging in my heart. I have come to believe that being held is the basic religious affirmation. Other faith communities affirm it in their own ways. It is central to the Bible from the beginning:

“And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and for his wife, and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:21, NRSV)

“If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

... even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.” (Ps. 139:8-10, NIV)

There is holding on—we do that as long as we can. And there is being held. Being held is better, as every child knows. “Behold, I bring you good news.” (Luke 2:10), a concert angel announced earlier that night. “Come and behold him,” we sang, and sang again. Behold! Be held! So it was. So it shall be, always.

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LIVING THE MISSION STATEMENT

by **A. H. Harry Oussoren**

In 1992, Erin Mills United Church (EMUC) took possession of a brand-new church facility on 2.8 acres in a new area of suburban Mississauga, Ontario. A parking lot and concrete sidewalks equipped the site for walkers, bikers, and drivers.

Young people in the area also realized that the facility had potential! Their skateboards could speed along on the sloped parking lot and along the curbs, ramp, and steps of the building.

The reaction was predictable. “What are those kids doing on our property? They’re waxing up the curbs for sliding and it looks horrible! They are defacing the property. They could hurt themselves and we’d be

vulnerable. I don't think our insurance would cover the liability! We should stop them." "Hey, you, you're trespassing; so get out of here!" was one driver's personal response to the skateboarders in his way.

The Council debated questions: "We need to block their skateboarding here, but how?" "What if the kids react and vandalize our facility?" "Our insurance requires us to carry out due diligence . . ." "Yes, but does our mission statement have anything to say about this?"

The mission statement—"To offer opportunities for all persons to experience the love of God through Jesus Christ"—was carefully parsed. All persons? Does that include skateboarding teens in our parking lot? Is that really practical? Is it responsible? Is this an opportunity? What would Jesus do? Well, okay, but what might it look like to respond to these young people in line with our mission statement? And where might that take us?

It led to careful dialogue involving congregational leadership and the youths—usually in the sanctuary. They told us about their situation, the need for recreational space in the still immature neighbourhood. We let them know we were driven by more than only property concerns; that we had a mission statement and convictions that led us in surprising, often counter-cultural directions, including concern for their wellbeing as people loved by God. But that included concern for their physical safety, and our responsibility to be good stewards of the facility.

Together, we gradually worked out plans we could all live with, with occasional *faux pas* on both sides. Skateboarding was permitted with some conditions. We grew in mutual respect for each other's concerns and needs, and started to imagine together how the suburban neighbourhood could become more youth friendly.

Planning started on a volunteer-run summer drop-in program—Oasis—where young people could shoot hoops, play table games, skateboard, and just hang out safely. That first summer was a roaring success, drawing lots of teens—younger and some too old!—but also a risky venture with inadequate supervision and direction. No disasters by the grace of God, but clear need for due diligence!

More investment of time and money was required to build on the fragile initiative. With help from various church and community sources, including the local Rotary club and the United Way, a youth worker was hired. She addressed volunteer leadership concerns and safety issues, while cultivating the link between the congregation and community, between youth in the congregation and youth in the community.

Beyond recreational activities, the congregation mounted a morning breakfast program in nearby social housing apartments and a

homework help program which increased the scope of the congregation's informed concern for children and youth.

With strong lay leadership, the initiative grew into the Erin Mills Youth Outreach Program, a sign that the initiative was maturing as an organization. The ministry evolved further and required distinct organizational structuring and accountability. So, in 2008, the Erin Mills Youth Centre (EMYC), whose offices are still located in EMUC, was chartered as a legal entity and as an incorporated ministry of The United Church of Canada.

EMYC continues the legacy started by the Spirit—in the guise of young people dressed in jeans, sports jerseys, and reversed baseball caps, doing amazing tricks on skateboards—calling a congregation to take its mission statement seriously.

Mission statements are more than a collection of cleverly chosen words. Too often they are mounted on walls like a trophy or published in the order of service as a motto. But there are moments when the Spirit uses those all-too-easy words to challenge us: “Are these words real? Or are they just pious hopes untested?”

Happily, the Erin Mills congregation was tested and responded hospitably in faith, with courage, imagination, generosity, energy, and in a spirit of partnership to make real the words chosen as the congregational mission back when Halton Presbytery constituted the congregation in 1989.

God's unfathomable love calls us always to do amazing things that often go against the grain, but which are a core part of God's shalom reign. This dramatic congregational initiative has given opportunity for countless young people to experience, if not articulate, the love of God in Christ.⁷

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⁷Learn more about EMUC at <http://emuc.ca/About-Us/Vision-and-Mission> and visit the EMYC Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/pg/erinmillsyouth/about/?ref=page_internal.

HOW DOES A MINISTER GRIEVE?

by Michelle Robinson

When serving a pastoral charge, a minister expects to care for members of the congregation and community who experience grief, trauma, and difficulty. She knows the liturgies, prayers, and the patience required for long hours at the hospital. Invited regularly into fragile moments, the minister bears witness to the many crosses of human suffering.

I took all of this for granted. I thought I knew the landscape of grief; then found myself viscerally in the graveyard of Good Friday. My first pregnancy had ended; my triplet daughters had been born at twenty-three weeks and lived only five days.

How does a minister grieve? I didn't know. The people of the suburban church I serve didn't know either. They wanted to help me. They were also watching me closely: *Is she angry at God? Is her faith shaken? Can she pray? Will she be okay?* What does a congregation do when the person it engages to bring a "word of the Lord" desperately needs a word herself?

There is an often asked question: "What do people do who don't have faith?" Over the years I thought the question referred to the personal dimension of faith. The church I serve has deepened my understanding of the ways in which faith is also communal expression. As Thomas Long wrote: "Faith as an inward reality trusts God's promise that 'mourning and crying and pain will be no more' (Rev. 21:4). Faith as an outward reality prays boldly for those who mourn, serves tenderly those who weep, works tirelessly to ease the pain of those who are wounded."⁸

After the babies were born, church members held vigil and prayed for what might be possible as my husband and I faced the improbable. Candles were lit for our three, tiny beams of light.

Individuals sent emails and cards with words that were tender, well-meaning, and occasionally clumsy. Food was dropped off, prayer shawls were knit. Someone placed a cross covered in bright, silk sunflowers in the front lawn at our house like one of those roadside markers acknowledging the scene of an accident. It was odd, and somehow appropriate.

Parents shared their rarely-told stories of infant loss, bravely opening the deep wounds of grief to let us know we weren't alone.

⁸ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 114.

The church helped us organize a funeral. People sang when my husband and I could not, and listened as we spoke our daughters' names in sorrow-soaked bewilderment. The United Church Women made egg salad sandwiches with buttered bread and assembled vegetable trays while fretting over how much coffee to brew. Bone china tea cups were laid out carefully alongside pink napkins. At the reception people ate, wept, and stared numbly at the floor. Together we tried to make meaning out of what made no sense. In a time of profound absence, the Body of Christ offered its presence.

Praying, sharing, singing, serving, breaking buttered bread—these rituals and rhythms of church life used to feel routine, all in a day's work. Yet, it was these ordinary activities—expressions of communal faith—that had the power to provide a lifeline in the most desolate landscape.

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KNOCKING ON THE DOOR OF GRIEF

by Ed Searcy

It was 1980. At the ripe age of twenty-six I had been settled on a seven-point pastoral charge in southern Manitoba. Forty years later I am accustomed to being “the Reverend.” Then it was all new. Looking back, what I remember most vividly are the deaths and the funerals. I had presided at a couple of funerals on a summer field. But this was of a different magnitude. Now I was on call to respond to grief in all of its manifestations.

The first phone call from Hugh at the funeral parlour came soon after I arrived in town. Two men had been killed in an accident on the highway. The driver had a heart attack and his passenger could not pull him off the steering wheel before they swerved in front of a semi-trailer. I was to preside at both funerals. I don't remember what I said. I do recall the bundle of nerves as I gathered up the courage to knock on the door of each grieving family. Then and there I learned to pray on the doorstep of grief for the presence of the Holy Spirit in such a wounded place.

Many of the funerals were at the Funeral Parlour which had a culture all of its own. I remember the two hymns that seemed to be chosen by every family—“The Old Rugged Cross” and “In the Garden.” At first, both felt outdated to me. Besides, the organist played both slowly while few actually sang aloud, leaving me to attempt to carry the tune. Yet as I listened to the stories of lives that had spanned two World

Wars and a Great Depression I began to understand. These hymns that speak of God's presence through trial and suffering were beloved because they had proclaimed the gospel in the midst of great hardship.

Four decades later there is one funeral that stands out. Doug McNabb had welcomed me with open arms. He was a wise elder who took me under his wing, sharing encouragement and care. It was only when he died that I learned that Doug had quietly offered this same encouragement and care to every minister who had come through town. His witness left a lasting impact on me, as did his funeral. He left clear instructions that the opening hymn was to be "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven." Over the years whenever a family has asked for a suggestion of a hymn for a funeral I have taken Doug's advice and offered this setting of the 103rd Psalm. In a time when funerals have morphed into "Celebrations of Life," this strong hymn of praise locates our lives within the grand narrative of God's mercy and grace.

There was one tradition that left an indelible mark upon me. Hugh and I regularly travelled in the hearse at the head of a slow procession along the highway on our way to a cemetery that was often located in a town thirty or forty miles away. As we passed fields where farmers were at work on their tractors or combines they would invariably stop their machine, get off and stand with their hats off. They usually had no way of knowing whose body was on its final journey. It might be someone of high repute . . . or not. They only knew that death had invaded and that grief was close. It was a powerful liturgical act, carried out in silence, and yet it spoke volumes. Later in my ministry I couldn't help but notice how death seemed so invisible in the urban west coast culture where I served.

That first year in ministry taught me that any sermon I ever preached would have to be worthy of preaching in the face of death. I suspect that it is the reason I found myself drawn increasingly to a theology of the cross. Every Sunday, every sermon, was and is a matter of life and death. Those home visits and funerals also informed my growing call to be a priest—one who holds back the river so that the people can cross to the other side. That was the answer to my prayer for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In God's great mercy those living rooms and funeral parlours became safe sanctuaries where mortals travelled from life, through death, to life on the other side.

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METACOGNITION AND LEARNING ABOUT GRACE**by Peter Short**

*The cognitive psychologists speak of “metacognition” which is the activity of stepping back and thinking about your own thinking. It is what you do when you stop for a moment in your pursuit of a solution, and wonder whether your understanding of the problem is adequate . . .*⁹

When I began ministry on the Gaspé Coast I was assigned to 4 small congregations along the Bay of Chaleur. The people were farmers, fishers, homemakers, teachers, railway workers. Official Board meetings were scheduled to begin at 7:00 p.m. I would be in my chair at the front of the church at 7:00 sharp to call the meeting to order. But nothing seemed to get going. No sooner had I called for the reading of the minutes than somebody would ask, “Where’s Albert?” Someone else would say, “I think he’s in the barn with a calf that’s failing.” Then someone would add that Albert’s sister was on her way from Montreal to visit. This would lead to an extensive discussion about weather conditions on the road.

Before I could get the meeting properly started, it was already out of hand, the agenda blown. It was a frustration to get it back on track.

One day I began to suspect a hidden agenda. My agenda may have been blown, but maybe theirs wasn’t. For the good people of these congregations, the first item on their church’s agenda was actually not the call to order and the reading of the minutes. The first item was always, *How is everybody*, and what is happening with our people? The first item on the agenda turned out to be the one before the agenda starts.

This was a small and precarious community of Anglophones living an isolated and fragile life in eastern Quebec. Their primary agenda—the underground stream that ran beneath the surface of all their church’s issues—was the vitality and the very existence of their community which had been handed down to them by their ancestors in this rugged and beautiful place by the sea.

It’s not always obvious, this “hidden” agenda of a congregation, nor is it the same in every community, but its depth and strength will eventually prevail over whatever agendas unwitting ministers may lay over it. The task is not to escape the primal agenda but to join it.

⁹ Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (Penguin Books, 2009), 99.

In that first pastorate we lived in a big old manse overlooking the Baie des Chaleurs. The manse had a bathroom but it didn't have a shower. I wanted to have a shower in the house so I called a meeting of the Manse Committee. The Manse Committee discussed my request at some length without reaching a decision. Eventually, several days later, it was agreed that a shower would be installed. Experiencing this delay in what seemed to me a simple decision was how I learned that decision-making in community is complex, and is not accomplished exclusively by those elected to do it. Best to learn the unwritten process and the unspoken protocols.

A member of the Manse Committee arrived at the door one day equipped with the materials necessary for the job. He spent the day working at it and when he had finished he called me upstairs to see what I thought of it. I turned the water on and it worked great. As I was expressing my delight and thanking him, a huge smile of happiness spread across his face. Then he packed up and left.

A few days later I was driving down the coast and I pulled into the lane at his place. This was my first visit to this small shingled house with the little grey barn behind it. We had a good chat at the kitchen table. Then he asked if I would have a cup of tea. Yes, that would be nice, thank you.

I watched him rise from his chair. He picked up a bucket from the counter and went out the screen door. I could see through the screen that he was in the yard at the pump, pumping water into the bucket. It was dawning on me as I watched, that this man didn't even have running water in his own home, much less hot water and a shower. Why hadn't he said anything when he installed the shower? Why had he seemed so happy when I was satisfied?

I had arrived in that country with big plans for how I was going to apply all this learning I'd got hold of in Toronto, bring them up to date, especially on the theology of grace—my favourite. I already knew what I had to do—before I even got there.

But in the kitchen of that little house, looking through the screen door, watching him pump water from the well in the yard, I learned something about grace that I can't even put into words. That was one sacramental cup of tea.

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FREEDOM**by Maryann Skinner**

The sun shone while three women inmates gathered with me in a little side room of the prison chapel to celebrate a renewal of their baptism. One of them had first asked for this ritual, and two others had joined her in support. I had brought my juice pitcher from home for use as the baptismal vessel. The clear glass jug containing fresh water was placed in the middle of a small round table. As the four of us sat comfortably in cushioned chairs, the glass pitcher made a beautiful focal point for conversation about the sacrament.

We spoke of the life-giving qualities of water, and its power for transformation. The woman who had first requested the renewal of her baptism shared her readiness for change. She had spent countless years broken in spirit and down on herself. She was ill treated by people because of the type of mistakes and transgressions that mottled her history. The time had come for her to stop being ruled by hurt.

While in prison she engaged in restorative justice programs and worship services offered by chaplaincy. Through an intense journey of confession and repentance she was already embracing new ways forward. She was ready for restoration and renewal; the kind that the Holy Spirit is capable of ushering. During the casual ceremony we prayed. We pondered the grace of God that the one seeking the baptismal ritual had allowed anew into her life. As part of our reflection together, God gifted me with words to remind the small group that as incarcerated individuals they remain nonetheless part of the wider church. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the body of Jesus Christ transcends the razor wire. We are all as little ones who belong to God's care as children to a loving Father. Such knowledge is a freeing wisdom. The group agreed.

As the water freely flowed from the glass pitcher into the basin it chortled, splashed, and made ripples. A prayer was shared and a creed was spoken. Suddenly, like the urge to sing a known chorus together, the desire to feel the anointing of the living water washed over all of us. The ceremony led to each person feeling the touch of refreshment; the renewing energy was experienced by two joining with the one who first desired it. The participants commented that it felt remarkably touching, refreshing, and truly lovely. God is good.

When the time came for me to leave the institution for the day, I carefully packed the glass pitcher in a cardboard box. I carried it through the corridors to the security desk situated near the front gate. I held the box as I stood chatting with the correctional officer at the post. After a

while, I noticed a sound coming from the corner of the large front and side windows. I interrupted the officer to question the sound with a matter of fact statement, “There’s a bird there.” “Yes,” he said smiling, and good-humoredly added, “I didn’t get the memo, and it startled me from behind when I began my shift a few hours ago.” He explained how he had shepherded it to the front window. From there, the little brown starling would not move to the door, which was purposely left open. The pauses in our discussion were filled by the intermittent noises of flapping feathers, a tattering beak, and the thumping torso of the little bird as it repeatedly flung itself at the window.

Finally, I said, “I think I can catch that bird.” I knew I held a choice of two things that would work—the glass pitcher and the box. The box would also be a good temporary trap.

It was surprisingly simple to hold the opening of the clear glass pitcher to the edge of the window where the bird was and to coax the little thing to go inside. “Come on, little bird,” I said, and in it went. God works in mysterious ways and there was a round top to a stray container on the floor right near where the bird was captured. I picked it up and slid it perfectly over the opening to the pitcher. Then I stepped out the open door of the building. I held the pitcher up towards the sky. I removed the lid and the little bird gusted out immediately. Away it flew, up and over the locked gate and metal fencing.

I looked down at the empty vessel in my hand. It was still wet with baptismal water drops. When back inside, I mused to the officer, “I have never freed a bird from jail before.” He chuckled.

The Holy Spirit transcends the razor wire. We are all as God’s little ones who belong as children to a loving Father. Such knowledge is a freeing wisdom. Thanks be to God for this shared experience.

Maryann Skinner is a minister of The United Church of Canada serving as a chaplain at the Grand Valley Institution, a federal prison. She brings her experience in prior congregational ministry to the chaplaincy role. maryannskinner@hotmail.com

I WILL GATHER YOU by Dale Skinner

In 2003 I was settled in the Knowlton-Creek Pastoral Charge within Quebec-Sherbrooke Presbytery. By the time I arrived, the English-speaking church in Quebec had been diminished, possibly a result of the

mass exodus of Anglophones after the Quiet Revolution and the growing secularism of Quebec society. Efforts had been made to engage in ministries in French and many English-speaking congregations were including some French in services as a way to adapt and reach out, but it changed little. There was also another divide. The distance between the dominant Roman Catholicism that was a part of the heritage of most Quebecers and the Protestantism of our own church. Daily life in this context was one in which I was constantly reminded that I was part of a minority. Little did I know then how that experience would better prepare me for ministry in the growing secular landscape of Ontario.

One of my fondest memories of serving in the Eastern Townships was the way the various congregations in the presbytery came together for shared meetings, ministries, and worship—men and women, both young and old, traversing long distances and sometimes through terrible weather conditions because they understood the value of being together. Easter sunrise services are a good example of this. One year it was decided to have the service on the farm of a family near Mount Shefford. It was late March, winter in Quebec, and it meant getting up pretty early to make sure the car was cleaned of snow, warmed up, and ready to go for a 5:30 a.m. sunrise. It was a solitary feeling, making that drive through the cold chill of a moonlit night.

When I arrived at the farm, I was welcomed by our hosts and others who had arrived earlier. As we built the fire outside and got things set up, we watched for the headlights of cars coming up the driveway, ready to welcome others as they arrived. As the time of sunrise grew closer, the growing light revealed the increasing numbers of those who had come, some with musical instruments in hand, others clutching pieces of paper with readings or hymns to sing, while others carried bags and containers with food for the meal to be shared afterwards. Even with the fire it was bitterly cold. I could barely move my fingers to play my fiddle. Teeth chattered as Scripture was read; singing brought warmth. I know we were all more than a little relieved when worship ended, and we could stream into the old, expansive farmhouse for a hot drink and something to eat. So many had made the effort to be together! I knew it was Christ whose Spirit had got us out of our warm beds to be together. The grace of God was in the communion we shared.

Time and again, the prophetic voices of Scripture declare the promise of a God who says in different ways to God's people, "I will gather you" (Ezek 36:24; Jer 29:14; Isa 54:7). Jesus also expresses it as a longing (Matt 23:37), and forsook all comfort to make this longing known. Experiences like that sunrise service near Mount Shefford help

me understand why. In a world where faith becomes individualized and worship evaluated by “What do I get out of it?” the Spirit’s presence is evident in how not only worship but life itself is transformed. The relationship does not begin with God and end with me. It is multi-directional and eternal, a living relationship into which Jesus invites his followers. Mysteriously the needs of others are met and the faith of others sustained even as we come with our own need. Oddly enough we meet the needs of others out of our own need. I liken it to how in math, a negative multiplied by a negative will equal a positive. In Christ, when a need meets a need, there is the promise of something greater. There is this promise that, when we are scattered or even invisible, God will gather us.

Dale Skinner has served congregations in Ottawa, Toronto, Eastern Quebec, and Mississauga. He currently serves the congregation of St. Paul’s United Church in Milton, Ontario. daleskinner@hotmail.com

DYING WELL

by Ross Smillie

It started with a phone call. A woman in my congregation asked me to visit her sixteen year-old cousin. For many months he had been fighting an aggressive form of leukemia. He had just been told that his cancer was terminal and that he would die soon. He had been so positive up to that point, I was told, that he would beat the cancer. But now the cancer had beaten him, and apparently he had just given up.

So I phoned and made an appointment, and went to his house. His parents were there, and they explained that he spent most of his time in his basement bedroom, playing video games, distracting himself so that he didn’t have to think about the future. There was a strange irony there. He was so upset that he had so little time left that he was wasting what little time he had.

We all sat around a table in a sunlit porch and drank tea. I tried to get this young man talking. I asked him how he was feeling about what was happening, but he was not in a talkative mood. I couldn’t think of what else to do or say. I probably did assure him that he had nothing to fear, that to enter eternity is to live in the presence of love. But he was concerned only with this life and with his tragedy of impending death.

He needed to know how to live the time he had left and die well. But I could think of no way to help. So there we sat, making

awkward small talk. It is the awkwardness I remember most clearly. In the face of the great mystery of death, we needed big talk, honest talk. We were all very much aware that there were things that should be said, but we didn't know what they were, let alone how to say them.

This memory is thirty years old now, but it has resurfaced for me as I am facing cancer myself. I continue to wonder, what could I have said to help him die well? If I could do it again, What would I say? And whether I have decades left myself, or only a few years, what can I learn about how to live fully in the time I have left? Our culture spends so much energy delaying death that we often fail to consider what it means to die well. But when the inevitable finally stares us in the face, what do we say? How do we help?

I could, for example, have acknowledged that what was happening to him was unfair. I could have quoted the last words of Jesus who raged, as he was being tortured to death, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It was unfair that he was going to miss so much of the blessing of life, I could have said. I could have encouraged him to grieve and to rage. Raging against death would have been better than avoiding the thought of it.

And then I could have told him that I hoped that he would move beyond raging: "It sucks that you are dying, yes. But the reason it sucks is that life is a great gift. Many people who live long lives squander that gift. But even a short life can be rich and full. When the time becomes short," I should have told him, "then it also becomes precious. So, whatever time you have left, claim it as a gift; live the time you have fully, honestly, richly. Be honest. Find a way to say what you really feel. Write it in a journal first, if necessary, but eventually, say it aloud. Take the time you have left to speak courageously with each of the people precious to you: speak from your heart, express your grief, ask forgiveness for when you have hurt others, offer forgiveness for the hurts you have received. And finally, give thanks for all the gifts of love and joy and hope and generosity you have received."

I wish that I had said all of that. I wish I could have spoken from my heart. But I didn't. We made small talk in the face of the big mystery.

Ross Smillie continues in ministry with Sunnybrook United Church in Red Deer, AB, until his planned retirement this coming May.

“LET THE CHILDREN COME”: AT TABLE WITH CHILDREN by Miriam Spies

Presiding at Jesus’ table in community is a privilege and a joy. Being at table is not something I take for granted, especially as a disabled woman. I grew up in The United Church of Canada, with both parents serving as ordained ministers. I have never taken Holy Communion from a disabled presider. And though our policy is that ordination is open to all who are baptized and professing members, the table has not always been an easy place to stand, or sit, for people whose bodies do not fit the able-bodied male identity. This has been and can still be the case for women, racialized peoples, queer people, and others living with marginalized identities.

Having only been ordained four years, one of my favourite memories of presiding at table was with “my” children in our Sunday school room. I was serving as the Young Families and Young Adults minister at St. Paul’s United Church, Dundas, ON. After gathering and checking in with each other, we helped set the table together. As they placed each item, we talked about its significance in the sacrament of Communion: a plate with a loaf, a pitcher of grape juice and a cup, a cross, and a Bible. We drew chairs and sat around the table. With my encouragement, the children told the stories and we remembered God’s presence with the creation and with peoples from the time God created the world and called on people like Noah and his family, Miriam and Moses, Sarah and Abraham, to serve God’s world in their time and place.

We remembered Christ coming to the world as a baby in Jesus, and how he served all with God’s love: calling children to come to him, talking with people that other people ignored, feeding and eating with people as he travelled, and speaking things that were hard for some people to hear. Coming to the institution narrative, we remembered Jesus at table with his dear friends and the words of love and hope he spoke to them. We praised God for his life, death, and resurrection, reminding all peoples that God is with us. With my cerebral palsy, I need help breaking and pouring, and so one child broke the loaf and another child poured the cup. With all of our hands raised over the elements, I invoked the Spirit. We served one another, receiving and responding with “Amen.” Afterwards, we shared a prayer thanking God for being with us throughout our time. At the end, we had five minutes to play a game of Octopus!

In the synoptic gospels, the disciples are wary of having little ones crowd around Jesus, even to the point of rebuking them

(ἐπετίμησαν). Jesus however, turned their understanding upside down again, ordering the disciples not to prevent or hinder (κωλύετε) the children in seeking to be in relationship with Jesus. This story was on my heart as the children and I gathered around Jesus' table with small red chairs. Beginning the day by listening to each other's stories created an intimate space where we could hear God's love for particular people in particular places during particular times. Through that communal remembering, I experienced God's love for us, the particular piece of the Body of Christ, in our room, gathered together, thousands of years after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Through the children's breaking and pouring as I spoke the words, the bread and juice were symbols of life, joy, and love. Through serving one another, we all shared and witnessed God's love travelling around the circle. They were, and likely remain, active children, full of energy and laughter. However, in preparing and being at table together, their bodies and voices quietened as we focused on telling stories and sharing God's love made known to us in Jesus together.

In this intimate space, my power wheelchair and dog guide fit at the table surrounded with young people—my disabled body that has not always fit or been welcome in Christian history or present-day practice. In this space, the children fit in a space that has not always been accessible to them, to deepen their relationship with Jesus and with one another. Together we participated in the liturgy, and shared the actions of breaking, pouring, and serving one another. Together we fit as the Body of Christ with God in that particular place and time. This table experience will remain with me throughout my ministry. I pray that this has had an impact as to how the children take their place at Jesus' table. Perhaps this might influence who they might anticipate presiding at Communion tables in their future lives. I pray that God will call one of them to preside one day.

Miriam Spies is currently a PhD student at Emmanuel College, Toronto, looking at how churches can move from ministry with people with disabilities to ministry offered by clergy with disabilities. She is completing a term of service on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.
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BAPTISM INTO MINISTRY **by Martha ter Kuile**

It was really by luck rather than planning that I stopped in to see Jane that day. It was the week after my ordination service, and I had travelled to Toronto for a meeting at the national office. When it ended earlier than expected, I lingered in the bookstore, mulling over church supplies, trying to picture myself in my settlement charge. From there I made my way to her house on Major Street, hoping to find her awake.

Jane and I had been friends since the day we met in a history class at the University of Toronto. She had made an insightful comment on the psychology of imperialism, and I caught up with her on the path to the coffee shop to chat. It was a conversation that continued for twenty-five years.

Our paths had diverged over the decades, with travels and husbands and children and careers, but we stayed in touch. She married a writer, became a writer herself, and lived in Toronto. I worked in international development, married a soil scientist, and first lived abroad, and then near Ottawa. From a distance we shared our thrills and sorrows. We laughed together at the way life keeps turning out to be preposterous. The grotesqueness of cleaning house, and the disgusting things you find in the drain. The strangeness of men. The lapse from irony and cleverness into cliché when true love appears. The ambivalent agonies of step-motherhood. She was the one person who understood my mid-life desire to become a minister. “An arguably plausible way to spend all your time thinking about the meaning of life,” she said. “You can be a permanent undergraduate.”

During the four or five years that I had been preparing for ordination, Jane had been playing a nasty game of cat and mouse with brain cancer. Operations and chemo interspersed with times of energy and relief, but recently the news had been more discouraging. With the worst outcome appearing, however faintly, on the horizon, Jane and her husband Stephen had begun to consider the best way to talk about her illness with their young son Peter. I was glad to have a chance to visit.

Stephen met me at the door and I followed him up the narrow stairs to their book-filled bedroom. “She is sleeping now,” he told me. “The doctor may come over again.” Jane lay on her back, peaceful in a white bed, and surrounded by pillows. Her breath came in long snores. I settled into a rocking chair to wait, looking more closely at her face than perhaps ever before.

The neighbourhood sounds of a June afternoon drifted in through

the window, along with dappling sunshine, and Yo Yo Ma played Bach in an endless cello sonata. Stephen potted in the kitchen, and then came upstairs with tea. Not sure if Jane could hear us, we sat and recounted old stories, tried to piece together a chronology of our meals together. We smiled, remembering the trek he and Jane had made out to Guelph to inspect my fiancé. And I told Stephen about a time early in their courtship when she had called me in the night, panicked that he had not returned from a meeting with his ex-wife. “She was so afraid that she would lose you.” It felt odd to remember the fragility of those days now that a new fragility loomed.

Slowly the clamour of my day and my busy life fell away. Instead of hurrying off, I stayed while Stephen went out to buy a few groceries. A nurse came by to bathe Jane, and remake the bed. There were phone calls and more visits arranged. The angle of the sunlight changed as the afternoon wore on. But Jane didn’t wake up.

Peter came in from school. At nine, he was sprightly, a wiggly child. Sharing his bed in these days of Jane’s illness, Stephen said, was like sleeping with a lawnmower. Peter climbed onto the bed to hug her, then ran to his room to check his Lego. He came back, and this time picked up a hairbrush. He brushed Jane’s hair without speaking. The nurse had left Vaseline for her lips, and all three of us sat on the bed while Stephen showed him how to put it on. “Very gently, that’s right.” And then Jane took a deep breath, and paused. Another deep breath. Then nothing.

Stephen and I looked at each other, taken by surprise, not certain. Peter’s voice was uneasy: “What’s the matter with her?” I answered slowly, a last small act of friendship: “I think your mom has died.”

Martha ter Kuile is in ministry at Bloor Street United Church in Toronto. Before entering ministry she lived and worked in agricultural development in Kenya, Ecuador, Nigeria, and Guatemala. marthatk@rogers.com

ANXIETY ON THE JOB**by Mac Watts**

My wife and I returned from Scotland, where I had spent two years of post-graduate study, in the latter part of 1955. I had been called to a mixed-farming area in western Manitoba, the Miniota-Isabella Pastoral Charge. This was a four-point pastoral charge, made up of two two-point charges, which had been amalgamated three years earlier.

My predecessor, Ken Moffatt, had managed to conduct four services each Sunday, and I was to do the same. The first service on a Sunday was at Arrow River at 11; the second, at Isabella, took place in early afternoon, while Beulah's service started at three. At Miniota the time for service was at 7. Sundays would be exhausting, but I was young and fit, and considered myself capable of coping. But I hadn't foreseen the unusual psychological reaction I was going to experience.

Our first-born had yet to arrive; so my wife, Bev, went round the charge with me on one of the first Sundays we were there. It happened only once, because I couldn't stand the thought of someone coming to more than one service, and having to participate in the same things four times. No one ever came to more than one service, but I continued to be haunted by the feeling that eventually, someone would. I began to choose different hymns for each of the four services. I was thus choosing sixteen hymns each Sunday, leading me to get a classroom scribbler to keep careful track of all these hymns. I often had a different opening prayer at each service, and always a different responsive reading.

I kept telling myself that it was all absurd. And no one ever complained about anything I was doing except, inevitably and predictably, that I sometimes chose unfamiliar hymns. I had wonderful support from people in all four congregations. I liked them, and as far as I could tell they liked me. But except for the first service of the day I was haunted by the feeling that the people couldn't wait for the service to end since they had been through it all before. If readers infer that this points to a serious psychological imbalance, I agree with them.

As the second Easter of my time there approached I proposed to the elders at Isabella and at Miniota, that the Easter service might include the Lord's Supper. Although the custom there, as in most United Church congregations at that time, was to hold Communion services four times a year—and never on Easter Sunday—the elders agreed to my proposal. I hadn't made the same suggestion at the other two congregations because I realized time constraints wouldn't allow for four Communion services

on the same Sunday. So, two of the services would be with Communion and two without.

The first service of the day, the one at Arrow River, was fine. But the service at Isabella was a nightmare for me. Here I was preaching about the wonders of the resurrection and yet wishing I could hurry it up. I was sure they could hardly wait for it to be over, having heard all about Easter before. But when the sermon was over we still had Communion to get through! And in those days, with the use of little glasses and small pieces of cubed bread, and elders not entirely sure what the next step was, there was the usual organized awkwardness. The only positive feeling I had was during the final hymn. Instead of using the second half of “Here, O My Lord,” which was almost universally used throughout the United Church in those days, I had chosen “Crown Him with Many Crowns.” I could tell that everybody enjoyed singing that. The length of the service allowed me no time to greet people at the door, and indeed, I felt I couldn’t face them. I threw off my clerical duds and made for my car and the service at Beulah.

At Beulah, where there was to be no Communion, I was not in such a bad state, and since I could go home for dinner before the evening service at Miniota I was much less stressed at that service. Yet there too I felt the length of the service left them impatient for the benediction and the chance to get home.

In the manse that evening I paced the floor in great agitation, saying over and over again to Bev, who sat silent on the couch as I raved: “I can’t do this four-service Sunday anymore. We’re going to have to leave. I’ll find something else to do. All this is driving me crazy.” Then the phone rang. It was getting close to ten o’clock. Who would be phoning at such an hour? Bev answered and came back to tell me that Mrs. Finkbeiner wanted to talk to me. Mrs. Finkbeiner was an elderly widow in the Isabella congregation, and one of my favourite people. But as I walked to the phone my throat was dry with apprehension. Surely she would be telling me that I had let them all down, as I was sure I had. Her voice was clear: “Mac, I felt I just had to call you tonight. I have to tell you that the service today was the most wonderful Easter service I have ever attended.”

Mac Watts is a United Church minister, former Dean of Theology at the University of Winnipeg, and founding editor of *Touchstone*.

PASTORAL CHAPLAINCY IN AN OPPRESSIVE POLITICAL SITUATION

by Harold Wells

I will always be grateful for the opportunity given me by The United Church of Canada Division of World Outreach to serve as university chaplain and lecturer in theology in Lesotho. A tiny African nation, totally surrounded by the Republic of South Africa, Lesotho is a poor, but beautiful mountainous country, 98% Christian: Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Anglican. I served as pastor, liturgist, and preacher to the Protestant congregation on the campus, taught undergraduate students in theology, and two days a week taught in the seminary of another town. That was 1976-1981, in a context highly charged by the anti-apartheid struggle next door. The Basotho people were economically dependent, and politically oppressed, by the surrounding apartheid state.

Basotho students, and many also from South Africa or Zimbabwe, exhibited a warm Christian piety, attending Sunday worship and daily evening prayers in large numbers. The students, like university students everywhere, struggled with their sexuality. My work involved preaching and counselling with students on sexual ethics, including one young man, depressed and ashamed, struggling with his homosexuality in a culture where the concept of sexual orientation was virtually unknown. It included preaching and teaching that addressed the tensions among Western modernity, African culture, and Christianity. Many students agonized over the conflict they felt between their warm-hearted love of Jesus and the collusion of Christianity with colonialism and capitalism. Some worried whether they should leave school and join the guerillas “in the bush.” Should a follower of Jesus “turn the other cheek,” or challenge oppressive powers with violent resistance? Our ecumenical Student Christian Movement ran public meetings and debates on such topics.

I recall a South African student from Soweto (a Johannesburg black “location”) who was a member of the SCM executive. I was a resource person to the group, together with my Anglican colleague Michael Lapsley (who, years later working in Zimbabwe, received a letter bomb from South Africa that grievously disabled him). Tsedisso (Tsay-dee-so), returning home to Soweto for Christmas, had been stopped, searched, and interrogated at the border by an agent of the South African Bureau of State Security. They feared that the campus was a hotbed of revolutionary activity and demanded that Tsedisso would henceforth, whenever he crossed the border, report to them about what was happening on the campus: what the chaplains were saying, what the

lecturers were teaching, what the students were organizing. Tsedisio was warned that if he lied they would know it, because they had many other spies already working for them there. Consequences of lying would be severe. They knew of the substantial group of Marxist faculty and students on the campus. But it was not the Marxists, but Lapsley and I, and some Roman Catholics and Mennonites in the country (Christians!), who were seen as a dangerous presence and were banned from entering the Republic. Tsedisio, informing us that he was now a “spy,” announced his resignation from the SCM executive. But we urged him to stay with us. We counselled this honest, devout young man to tell the truth, but discussed the ambiguities of what it meant to tell the truth to cruel, oppressive powers. He would need to avoid exposing innocent people, and if necessary, to lie judiciously, in ways that would be credible to his interrogators. In the two years or so before his graduation, this seemed to work. We were relieved that Tsedisio was not jailed or physically abused.

The government of Lesotho at that time was to a large degree a puppet of South Africa, and was itself very oppressive. On one occasion an Anglican student and a staff person who was a member of my congregation were detained and jailed without trial because of political activity within the country. Lapsley and I went together to the jail to visit them, taking Bibles, oranges, toothbrushes and blankets. The guard at the prison desk refused to allow the gifts or visits, telling us to *Tsamaeang!* “Go away! Go and look after your spiritual duties!” I said that to visit prisoners *is* our spiritual duty. Lapsley added: “Jesus told us that if we want to find him, we will find him in prison.” Amazed, the guard merely reiterated: “Go away!” We left, but decided to return with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken, which the guard agreed to pass in to the prisoners. When they were released some weeks later, they confirmed that they had received the chicken, and had heard our voices (from their cells just behind the front desk) and were greatly encouraged.

There was nothing particularly heroic about my ministry in Lesotho. As an expatriate from an aid-giving country, I was protected from persecution. Local clergy, if they spoke out about oppression, were much more vulnerable to jailing and abuse. My experience there gave me a glimpse into the challenges facing pastors working in circumstances of political oppression in many parts of the world.

Harold Wells is a retired United Church minister who has served in two pastorates, as a mission partner (with his wife Pat) in Lesotho, and as professor of systematic theology at Emmanuel College, Toronto.

PROFILE

ELIZABETH ANNE BARRETT

by Gayle Simonson



It seemed a strange thing for a woman to found the first Protestant Mission in southern Alberta. But that honour was reserved for Miss Barrett, the mission teacher, whom John McDougall sent, with one of his daughters as companion, to Fort Macleod. There she started a school, and held possession, until Henry Manning, his wife and family came on the ground six months afterward . . . An heroic soul was this pioneer woman, who lived and taught among the Indians for several years . . .¹

John Maclean, author of these words, had himself been a missionary at Fort Macleod not long after “Miss Barrett,” and was chief archivist for the Methodist Church in Canada when he wrote them. Probably reflective of his time, Maclean included just one paragraph on Barrett in a single chapter on women in his book, *Vanguards of Canada*, while male missionaries were accorded a whole chapter each.

Elizabeth Anne Barrett, or Libby as she sometimes signed her letters, came west in 1874, reaching Whitefish Lake, north-east of Edmonton, to teach with missionary Henry Bird Steinhauer. She was then transferred to Morley to work with the McDougall family. She died in Morley in 1888, but the intervening years were full and fruitful. With Steinhauer she lobbied the government, and their school became the first Protestant school in the west to receive government funding. In her two years at Whitefish, she helped prepare Steinhauer’s sons for further education in the east, and she wrote long letters east so that there is an excellent record of day-to-day life in that native settlement. Soon after arriving in Morley, she was present at the signing of Treaty 7, and her signature appears as a witness on the document. That was followed by the founding of the Methodist mission at Fort Macleod. Both in her letters

¹ John Maclean, *Vanguards of Canada* (Toronto: Missionary Society of Methodist Church, 1918), 260.

and on leave in the east, she was a successful fundraiser, also encouraging donations of books and Sunday School papers to aid in her teaching.

Barrett was born in Orono, Upper Canada, in approximately 1841 to shoemaker Charles Barrett and his wife Anne Cobbledick Barrett. Raised in a Methodist household, both Elizabeth and her sister Lottie became school teachers and Indian mission workers.² Elizabeth taught first at the Alderville mission near Orono, but was recruited in 1874 to travel west to Whitefish Lake, a three-month journey.

The missionary at Whitefish Lake, Henry Bird Steinhauer, was Ojibwa from Upper Canada, and his wife Jessie was Swampy Cree from what is now northern Manitoba. At the Whitefish Lake settlement, only their family spoke English. Teaching was therefore quite a challenge for the new teacher, but she understood the need to teach in the language of the pupils. She described the Cree people as “peaceable, kind and sociable,” but acknowledged that “the people love and cling to their mother tongues, and are not likely to soon permit the English to take its place.”³

Therefore, Barrett worked with Steinhauer to learn the syllabic system he used to write Cree, a system developed by James Evans. Steinhauer had worked at Norway House in northern Manitoba with Evans and other missionaries to translate the Bible into Cree more than twenty years earlier. According to Isaac Mabindisa, “she could convey the simplest ideas in Cree after her first year of residence in the community.”⁴ Although she was managing to teach in Cree with the help of illustrated books and papers, Barrett also taught English so that, by March of 1877, she wrote, “I now have a class of thirteen who have almost read through the Second Book, and in the testament from the beginning to the fifth chapter of St. John . . . They can also read some of the Cree Testament and Catechism.”⁵

That same letter gives a very detailed description of life at Whitefish Lake including food, clothing, hunting, and child care. She was, however, a product of her time, and though she admired the indigenous culture in many ways she commented, “I am constantly

² Donald Smith, “Elizabeth Barrett,” *Alberta History* 46, No. 4 (1998):19.

³ Elizabeth Barrett, letter dated 17 Dec. 1875, *The Christian Guardian*, 10 May 1876.

⁴ Isaac Kholisile Mabindisa, “The Praying Man: The Life and Times of Henry Bird Steinhauer” (PhD. Diss., University of Alberta, 1984), 449.

⁵ Barrett, letter of 1875, *The Christian Guardian*, 10 May 1876.

noting little improvements in their homes and in the school, and can plainly see that the old prejudices are slowly, though surely, giving place to white man's ideas of civilized life."⁶

Not all Barrett's letter-writing was personal. She could become political when the school was at risk. When government funding for the school was denied, she wrote directly to Lieutenant-Governor Alexander Morris protesting that "assurances had been made from time to time, to Chief James Seenum alias Pakan and others, including herself, that the grant would be made to Whitefish Lake School, and that the school's future could only be assured with government funding."⁷ A report submitted at the time by Steinhauer and Barrett indicated an enrolment of fifty-seven, with average attendance of thirty-six. In May of 1876, a grant of \$300 was awarded to match the amount given to the Roman Catholic mission at St. Albert. This was the first government funding for a Protestant school west of Manitoba.

Steinhauer himself was delighted with Barrett's work and shared his opinion with the Missionary Society. "I must now express the gratitude I and, I think, the people of the Station feel with me, in sending lady teacher, Miss Barrett, who now conducts the scholastic department of our work here. She is the person we have been wanting—the right person in the right place—zealously devoting herself to the work appointed her." He also noted that they were building a house for Miss Barrett.⁸

In the same report, Steinhauer wrote: "A foreigner, either as a Missionary or otherwise, will never take so well with the natives of this country, let him be ever so good and kind to them; there is always distrust on the part of the native to the foreigner, from the fact that the native has been so long down-trodden by the white man." For this reason, Steinhauer, who was himself highly educated, hoped to send his sons Robert and Egerton east to college so that they could become leaders. He was pleased that "Miss Barrett tells me that she can train these two boys so that they may enter any high school or college in Canada."⁹

Barrett's work in that regard must have been successful. When she left Whitefish Lake in 1877, Egerton Steinhauer took over the school.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mabindisa, "The Praying Man," 451.

⁸ Henry Bird Steinhauer, "White Fish Lake, 1874-1875," transcript from *Fifty-First Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Church of Canada*: Provincial Archives of Alberta, 75.387 item 161.

⁹ Ibid.

Two years later, Egerton (age 21) and Robert (age 19) entered the Cobourg Collegiate Institute to prepare for university entrance at Victoria College in Cobourg. Though they both graduated from high school, for financial reasons only Robert continued on. Egerton returned to Whitefish Lake. There, during western unrest in 1885, he worked with Chief Pakan and James Youmans to maintain the peace among the people of Whitefish Lake. He went on to serve at a number of mission stations.

At Victoria College, Robert excelled in sports and music and was popular among his fellow students. After ordination, he too went on to work at several mission stations in the west. He was also active in working for justice toward Canada's native people. In April of 1937, the work of the Steinhauer family was recognized by Victoria University, Toronto, when Robert was the first Native in Canada to be awarded the honorary degree, Doctor of Divinity. Donald Smith notes that the letter to Robert stated that, "For as your father was one of the first students a hundred years ago, you will be one of the first graduates of the new century of Victoria's life."¹⁰ The work of their teacher Elizabeth Barrett had laid a firm groundwork for the further education and work of Egerton and Robert.

As much as Barrett seemed to remain positive about her situation, there were bouts of homesickness. In 1875, she spent her leave visiting forts in Edmonton, Victoria (near Smoky Lake), and Lac la Biche. In Edmonton, she had met the factor Richard Hardisty and his wife Elizabeth, daughter of missionary George McDougall. Soon after, in a letter dated December 17, 1875, she wrote: "I don't think my tears were very far off when I sat down in their parlour last summer for the first time. To see once more pictures, a melodeon, carpet, bookcase, and a veritable sofa, I assure you was almost too much for me."¹¹ Out of concern for her isolation, the Missionary Society transferred Barrett in 1877 from Whitefish Lake to Morley to work with the McDougall family. There she had the companionship of several English-speaking women, including John McDougall's wife Elizabeth Boyd McDougall, his mother Elizabeth Chantler McDougall and his sister-in-law Annie McDougall, wife of his trader brother David. However, teaching required that she once more learn a new language as that mission was in Blackfoot territory.

Soon after arriving at Morley, Barrett travelled with John, Annie,

¹⁰ Donald B. Smith, "The Steinhauer Brothers: Education and Self-Reliance," *Alberta History* 50, No. 2 (2002): 3-9.

¹¹ Barrett, 1875 Letter. In *Christian Guardian*, 1876.

and David to Blackfoot Crossing for a significant event in Canadian history, the September 1877 signing of Treaty 7 between many aboriginal nations and the Canadian government. The treaty covered most of what is now southern Alberta. There they were joined by Fort Edmonton's Eliza and Richard Hardisty for the amazing spectacle. "Never before had such a concurrence of Indians assembled on Canada's western plains."¹² Sir Cecil Denny, then a member of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), described it in detail:

Imagine for a moment a thousand tepees in tribal camps on both sides of the Bow River. Smoke rises as women process the buffalo from a recent hunt. White tents in neat rows mark the location of more than a hundred NWMP and some government officials. The encampment also includes a number of traders, missionaries and reporters. As many as fifteen thousand horses graze in the trees beyond. A peace pipe ceremony, a sacred tradition, is part of the opening ceremony.¹³

Surely this scene indicates the trust that existed among the tribes, the NWMP, the government officials, and the missionaries. However, the event was not without incident. Denny also describes a sham battle in which several hundred young men staged a mounted war-dance around the camp, yelling and shooting into the air.

In the midst of the unfolding drama, six women shared a little tradition of their own. Mary Macleod, wife of Lieutenant-Colonel James Macleod, hosted a tea party that included the three Methodist women as well as Julia Shurtliff and Julia Winder, wives of NWMP officers. There, in a tent on the banks of the Bow River, "the ladies dutifully observed the niceties of a Toronto drawing room."¹⁴

No doubt as a sign of the respect these women had earned from the two Commissioners, Lieutenant-Governor David Laird who had succeeded Alexander Morris in the position, and Lt. Col. Macleod, all six women were invited to sign the treaty as witnesses.

The winter after the treaty signing, John McDougall sent Barrett to Fort Macleod to establish a mission there. She was accompanied by one of his young daughters from his first marriage to Abigail Steinhauer,

¹² Sir Cecil E. Denny. *The Law Marches West* (Moreton-on-Marsh, U.K.: Denny Publishing Ltd, 2000 [1939]), 101.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Joy Duncan, ed., *Red Serge Wives* (Centennial Book Committee, 1974), 25.

who had died in 1871. There Barrett established the first school in that part of Alberta. Although the NWMP had founded Fort Macleod only four years earlier, it was quite a contrast to her previous postings. In addition to the NWMP officers, several of whom had wives from eastern Canada, there was also a Force doctor. Coal was available for fuel, and there was a blacksmith shop. Many articles were brought up by boat from Fort Benton in Montana. When Laird travelled west for the treaty signings, he had noted: "In the village I found some excellent stores, supplied with almost every article of dry goods, hardware and groceries that any inland community requires." The area surrounding the community was already being used for agriculture.¹⁵

When missionary Henry Manning arrived in Fort Macleod, Barrett returned to Morley but her stay there was brief. In the summer of 1879, she returned to Ontario and resumed teaching. In addition to teaching, she soon began looking after her ailing parents but did not cease church work. She organized a Women's Missionary Society and a mission band in Orono. As well, to promote the work and help raise funds, she wrote poems to be published in *The Missionary Outlook*, including a lengthy 1883 poem in praise of the Steinhauers, which concluded:

God bless their home! May no ill come
To cloud their brightly setting sun.
Their joy and peace, with years increase,
And then the Master's glad "Well done."¹⁶

Following the death of her parents in 1885, Barrett returned by train to Morley, where she was welcomed warmly. However, after only two years, she became ill and died in February, 1888. Her grave lies west of Calgary on the Stoney reserve near the site of the old McDougall mission.

Elizabeth Barrett is one of many women who worked diligently in early western Canadian missions. Initially most came as wives of missionaries. Though their work and commitment equalled that of their husbands, their work is mostly uncelebrated. Maclean, in the one chapter he devotes to women, mentions several, including his own wife. He notes

¹⁵ Alexander Morris, *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories* (Toronto: Prospero Books, 2000 [1880]), 255.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Barrett, "Rev. Father Steinhauer," *The Missionary Outlook* 3, no. 4 (1883), reproduced in Mabindisa, "The Praying Man," 624.

that, “in primitive log houses and disjointed frame buildings, on the shores of northern lakes and far inland rivers and even in the Arctic, women of beauty and refinement have lived in dense solitude.” He lists a number of Anglican and Presbyterian wives, and mentions the sacrifice of Catholic nuns before giving brief acknowledgment to a few Methodists.¹⁷ With the establishment of the Women’s Missionary Society and the founding of its Dominion Board in 1881, women soon took a very active role in the organization of western schools, homes, hospitals, and missions.

Perhaps Henry Steinhauer’s description of Barrett in his 1874-1875 report could be applied to all these women of faith. “No one but a person feeling the constraining power of God in their heart can do as she does. She has come to us in the fullness of the gospel of peace.”¹⁸

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¹⁷ Maclean, *Vanguards*, 52.

¹⁸ Henry Bird Steinhauer, “White Fish Lake, 1874-1875.”

BOOK REVIEWS

What Does the Bible Say? A Critical Conversation with Popular Culture in a Biblically Illiterate World.

Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017. Pp. 186.

In the “Introduction to Preaching” course that I took many years ago as a first-year theology student, our instructor, the Rev. Gordon Nodwell, stressed the need to pay attention to contemporary culture. When you are serving in congregational ministry, he told us, you need to read the newspapers your congregants read (this being an era when the internet was unknown), listen to the radio stations they listen to, watch the TV shows most popular with them, and see the major movies they are most likely to attend. Being a good preacher, and a good pastor, he told us, requires knowing both what is happening locally and what shapes how they see life and make sense of the wider world. It requires that you know their world view.

I was reminded of Professor Nodwell’s comments as I read *What Does the Bible Say?* Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg argue, accurately, that while far fewer people attend Christian churches than would have been the case several generations ago, Christian teachings, or more frequently what are believed to be Christian teachings, grounded in Scripture, still exert much influence in our society. Those “teachings,” whether an accurate reflection of the Christian tradition or not, continue to shape the world view of many people, inside and outside the church.

In a society that is generally biblically illiterate, Beavis and Kim-Cragg want Christians to know “what the Bible actually says” (p. xi) as opposed to what popular culture often assumes it says. Knowing “what the Bible actually says” will enable Christians to begin to engage some popular misconceptions about both the biblical message and some related Christian theological convictions. Indeed, knowing “what the Bible actually says” creates a basis for offering some counter-cultural responses to the viewpoints espoused in popular culture about theological topics such as creation, the apocalypse, heaven, hell, Satan, the Antichrist, sin and salvation, to name but some of the theological topics Beavis and Kim-Cragg address in their book. In addition to learning what, in fact, the Bible itself says in relation to these theological concepts (which is usually different from what is presented in the wider culture as “a” or “the” biblical understanding), Beavis and Kim-Cragg also provide

readers with a sense of what contemporary biblical and theological scholarship is saying about these theological concepts.

Each of the book's ten chapters explores either one topic (e.g., Jewish-Christian relations) or several topics often linked in Christian theology (e.g., sin and salvation). Each chapter has a similar format—an overview of the chapter as a whole, a look at biblical passages related to the topic, an exploration of the topic theologically, and the suggestion of a movie that addresses or explores in some way this particular topic. The authors provide questions to be considered before and after viewing the movie. They also provide "Discussion Notes" about the movie, something particularly valuable regardless of one's familiarity with the movie.

The book has a superb bibliography. It also has both a subject and a Scripture index, features not often found in a book of this length, but ones that enhance the book's utility.

The authors have designed the book with study groups in mind. These study groups can be within a congregation or they can be groups brought together by some other common point of identity (e.g., a youth group) or interest. A number of congregations already show movies on a regular basis and others could doubtless be persuaded to do so as part of such a study. A discussion of theology in relation to a movie could be an intriguing and non-threatening way to have people wrestle with some key Christian theological concepts and to ponder how the ways one views these concepts affects one's approach to living.

If such study groups are the primary audience for this book, those serving as ministry personnel could be an important secondary audience. The discussion of theological concepts and of "what the Bible actually says" represents more than just a different entry point for engaging in theological reflection. This work can stir the pastoral imagination as to why and how one should take up some of these theological concepts with congregants in the course of one's pastoral ministry.

This book is a valuable resource in the important work of making sense of, and reflecting upon, one's life in the context of the Christian faith. It is one I am glad to have had the opportunity to read.

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Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine.**Cynthia Rigby. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018. Pp. 303.**

Over the years I've collected readers in theology as guidance for pastoral and homiletical work. When I served remote congregations I needed my own library and it grew to be large. Here's a welcome addition. *Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine* by Cynthia Rigby is both introductory text and refresher. She explains why Christian doctrines matter now. She writes for pastors and church leaders, students, and seekers. Rigby acknowledges that doctrine is often not well explained; it is associated with closed-mindedness; we are too busy to explore it. Her goal is to overcome those stumbling blocks. She succeeds.

Holding Faith is practical, visual, and clear. Rigby tells us how many angels can dance on the head of a pin and why that matters. She brings us "Three Tips for Speaking about the Infinite God," docetism as Clark Kent in a phone booth, Calvin as an example of how to do justice in the world, and the ascension as Jesus' connection with us to the very bone. Her teaching sticks. This book clarifies that we don't put our faith in doctrines, which are the teachings of the church, but that *the purpose of doctrine is to direct us to the proper locus of our faith*, God. Through doctrine we get to see the big picture of Scripture; again it is not our trust in Scripture that holds us, but our trust in God. This teaching is a guide in our own robust conversation about United Church faith statements as subordinate standards. I may be preaching to the choir, but her clarity on this principle is opportune.

Words about God matter because the Word became flesh. Rigby braids the three main theories of atonement—integrating, not harmonizing—so we see the merits of an expansive understanding of salvation. In discussing the Trinity, she portrays the three Persons as telling distinctive stories about the crucifixion—their shared story—as a family tells stories around a shared meal. The penny drops. We understand. A further trinitarian issue is our call to dislodge individual consumerism and establish collective wellbeing, still maintaining our individuality. This profound paradox is the scandal of the Trinity. I've found the theological reader I'd been seeking. What's more: it's a pleasure to read.

At a recent Festival of Homiletics, Rigby asked a thousand preachers: "Who picked up a theology text recently, simply for reading?" Five hands went up. Simply for reading: here's the *pleasure* of reading this book. It grips like *Game of Thrones* or *Carmen* the opera or the Raptors last June. Rigby can teach. She writes in a present voice, as if she

can hear my queries. Her conversational tone tackles the bad rap given to religion and doctrine. She writes with passion. And she's funny. She refers to Harry Potter, Augustine, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Winnie the Pooh, Rebecca Parker, SBNR (spiritual but not religious), middle school band concerts, theological terms as portals, sitting in a treasure trove running gold coins through our fingers and hanging pearl necklaces around our necks, theologians old and new—but I wish she'd included Doug and Rhoda Hall—Psalmists and disciples, and ancients alongside current global scholars.

Barth is her favourite. Rigby is Presbyterian and teaches our Reformed theology. She insists that grace is a gift of God, something we can do *nothing* to achieve. She couches that understanding in a constructive, not restrictive, tone: through grace we are free to *discover*. Isn't that the adventure of Christian life? "The faith we hold is the faith that holds Christ, and the faith that holds Christ is surplus grace. It is a faith that will never let us go because it is an overflow of the unconditional love of God." From this principle she leads us confidently into doctrines that teach faith that holds.

Exercises within the chapters hone our thinking. "Reflection and Discussion Questions," her concluding chapter, gives us teaching points. The indices are robust: a Scripture index, and a Names and Topics index with definitions noted. Rigby describes doctrine as a "treasure trove." Doctrine is intended to promote abundant life. This principle is critical for a popular church culture that dismisses the religious, essential nature of who we are and where we have been. Here we find wisdom and trust moving forward. Despite the common assumptions about doctrine, however, Rigby finds that people she meets enjoy theology. That observation rings true with our United Church working through *A Song of Faith* and recent remits. God calls us not to focus on being "right," but on being faithful disciples. Serious scholarship and exceptional communication: *Holding Faith* is the reader I need.

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The Theology of The United Church of Canada.

**Don Schweitzer, Robert Fennell, and Michael Bourgeois, eds.
Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019. Pp. ix+415.**

A member of our church recently visited her childhood congregation. She returned with a Sunday bulletin, with “no confession . . . no creed” scribbled in the margin. We alternate creeds every Sunday, but I was still surprised that they mattered to this open-minded millennial. When asked, she said “they give you something to grab on to.” By drawing us in to the “old, old story,” these beliefs offer us something solid and dependable to rest our spirits on.

A common criticism of The United Church of Canada, however, is that it has stripped away every Christian belief worth “grabbing on to” in the name of liberalism and open-mindedness. Not so, according to *The Theology of the United Church of Canada*, a recent collections of essays by a diverse group of United Church scholars. According to the introduction, United Church theology is regulated by four official statements of doctrine: *The Twenty Article of Doctrine* (1925); *A Statement of Faith* (1940); *A New Creed* (1968); and *A Song of Faith* (2006). Each emerged from a unique historical situation, therefore differing in language and theological emphases. Yet, each is intended as a “restatement” of certain “essential verities” [3] or “key theological concepts” [19] of the Christian faith first attested in the Bible [3]. The book devotes a chapter to each of these, organized by classical Christian doctrines (i.e. Trinity, christology, eschatology), with the exception of chapters on international and domestic missions. In doing so, these essays are intended to argue that the United Church has not abandoned Christian theology, but continues to restate and interpret it for new times and challenges.

The collection is most successful in this task when each statement is closely read in light of secondary denominational materials from the same context. For example, in the chapter on Scripture and Revelation, Rob Fennell demonstrates that the United Church has never held to anything resembling the fundamentalist view of biblical inerrancy. Even in 1925, nature, history, and the human heart were held as revelatory alongside Scripture [52]. Yet, throughout, the ultimate measure of revelation and the interpretation of Scripture is Jesus Christ, the “Word made flesh” (*A New Creed*), and “the Holy One embodied” (*A Song of Faith*) [57]. The christocentric nature of United Church theology, in fact, might be the most startling claim for the casual observer. Close

readings like this surprise the reader with the depth and creativity of theological reflection, revealing a unity of thought in seemingly disparate articulations of the faith.

The collection is less successful in this task where statements are read in opposition rather than in harmony or creative tension. On occasion the earlier, more obviously orthodox statements especially are deconstructed and dismissed rather than fully exegeted. Adrian Jacobs' essay, for example, provides a detailed account of the Holy Spirit in Indigenous theology. This is a worthy task in and of itself, but the reader learns little of the United Church's understanding of the Holy Spirit, which is the task of the book. In a few brief paragraphs, *The Basis of Union* and *Statement of Faith* are read as indistinguishable from the colonizing Western enlightenment worldview [168], while *A Song of Faith* is read as most amenable to Indigenous spirituality [168-69]. This might be a fair assessment if there were more than superficial engagement with the documents themselves. Here and elsewhere United Church theology is read as a progress from fundamentalism to open-mindedness, even though other essays clearly demonstrate an overall cohesiveness through time. Where the focus is on deconstruction it works at cross-purposes, leaving the reader confused, and undermining the book's overall task.

In the end, I recommend this collection with some reservations. I am a "liberal" who values the United Church's openness and inclusiveness. At the same time, I believe that our future is in living and sharing the Good News of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ, rooted in Scripture and tradition. This collection, I believe, was originally intended as an answer to critics outside and those dispirited inside the United Church who believe it has abandoned historic Christianity. At their most effective, these essays reveal a rich heritage, and demonstrate that the United Church continues to hold to the "essential verities." However, the book, much like our denomination, seems to be caught between the poles of deconstructing and affirming doctrine so as to miss fully accomplishing this task. In the end, we are given "something to grab on to." I am just unsure that, as a whole, this something is sturdy enough to answer our critics, or sustain a shrinking church that hungers for life-changing Good News.

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Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945.

**Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald. Montreal & Kingston:
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 291.**

Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald have given us a book in which the presentation and analysis of data regarding church membership and participation is the primary matter. This painstaking statistical work serves a narrative purpose. The authors want us to confront a fact—that Christendom in Canada is gone.

The first three chapters take us through the topics and questions we would expect in a book with this title. First we see what has happened to the mainstream Protestant denominations: The United Church of Canada, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Baptists. They were growing and culturally influential in the 1950s, lost that momentum in the 1960s, and entered a period of decline in the 1970s which only accelerated subsequently. What happened? “Affiliation collapsed because both men and women walked away and didn’t enroll their children in Sunday School or have them participate in other parts of church life” (41).

So did this decline reflect a movement toward the so-called “conservative” churches? Chapter 2 gives a carefully considered negative response to this question. Chapter 3 makes it clear that Canada’s largest and most diverse denomination, the Roman Catholic, has not escaped this downward trend. Recent immigration has contributed to some persistence in levels of belonging in this group, but the same erosion of identity and participation is now happening there as elsewhere.

It is in Chapter 4—*No Religion: The growth among the Disaffiliated and the Unaffiliated*—that Clarke and Macdonald make their most original and important contribution to the understanding of religion in Canada. First, they make clear both the size and the rapid and continuing growth of the group that responds to the census and other surveys by answering the question of religious affiliation by claiming “none.” In the 2011 national survey, the Nones far outnumbered all Canadian denominations other than Roman Catholic. Their numbers are trending upward while the others are in decline. Then there are the substantial numbers identifying themselves as simply “Christian” or “Protestant.” Clarke and Macdonald make a strong case for regarding most of these respondents as de-affiliates, persons who have moved away from participation in a denomination but are not yet ready to give up the broader identity. When the presumably de-churched are added to the non-churched, the movement away from participation in a community of faith

is even more striking. The authors conclude: “The number of Canadians who have had little or no contact with Christian churches is growing. Many more have no idea what these churches are about and, what is more, have no inclination to find that out for themselves” (196).

Those who are interested in what Clarke and Macdonald are saying, but who lack the inclination to walk with the authors through their careful sifting of census data, could read Chapter 5 as a summary of the findings and a set of answers to the question about what really happened. The authors’ set of answers includes: (1) the sixties—the authors point to a rising faith in technology as the answer to human problems; (2) “the sheer size of the baby-boom cohort, which led to the creation of a distinct youth culture”; (3) the sexual revolution, “a revolution in values, one that rejected the old ideals of domesticity and respectability” (225). This reviewer, while appreciating the importance of these observations, suggests that a focus on a single decade may be an oversimplification.

The final chapter makes clear that the authors are “not calling for a religious revival” (245). However, the dominant cultural ethos is one of “consumerism and pursuit of self-fulfillment,” rather than “respectability and service” (233), and this has negative consequences for the public realm. The authors reject the attempts of churches to respond by improving their merchandising strategies. Instead, they propose that “Canada’s churches will need to rediscover Christianity’s founding impulse for mission and engage their new cultural and religious context” (239).

This book is an excellent example of scholarship that can help us see the truth about our situation. However, Clarke and Macdonald seem unprepared to challenge directly an ethos of consumerism and the false and self-destructive understanding of freedom and human fulfillment that both conceals and sustains it. The best response to this work of truth-telling will be a re-discovery of the Good News that has been entrusted to us, including its ability to expose the lies of a culture of consumerism.

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Who's Minding the Story? The United Church of Canada Meets a Secular Age.

Jeff Seaton. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018. Pp. 127.

I read this book in the context of a study group populated by lay people who share diverse professional backgrounds. Their common critique was that the language was often inaccessible. Seaton's book appears to be a modestly edited version of his Doctor of Ministry thesis, and its language, especially in the chapter informed by Charles Taylor's "secularization story," makes it challenging for the lay reader.

Seaton begins by describing the theological ferment of the 1960s which produced the United Church's New Curriculum and such writings as Pierre Berton's *The Comfortable Pew*. Seaton argues that, influenced by advancing biblical scholarship and the likes of Berton's critique, The United Church of Canada opted for a "secular theology," abandoning the historic theology of the Christian church. In the following chapter Seaton reduces Taylor's voluminous work, *A Secular Age*, to a number of key concepts. He accepts Taylor's argument that secularization is more circular than linear in its progression, and that its current manifestation has produced an "immanent frame" in which many are left with a "spiritual quest." Seaton concludes that one resource for people on such a quest is the life and witness of the historic Christian community.

In chapters three and four respectively, Seaton introduces the ideas of John Pentland and Gretta Vosper. He concludes that they represent the United Church's current manifestation of a secular theology. Seaton critiques Pentland of Hillhurst United Church in Calgary for reducing the Christian message to resonate with current culture. He questions whether Hillhurst defines success through robust budgets and high attendance figures rather than through adherence to the kerygma of the Christian church. Seaton seems more inclined toward the message of Vosper of Westhill United Church in Toronto. She has concluded that atheism is preferable to the Christian story, which she describes as mythological at best, and, at worst, oppressive. Although Seaton's own faith is a counterpoint to atheism, he appreciates Vosper's challenge to the United Church to "come clean" about its theological worldview.

In his concluding chapters Seaton argues for a "progressive orthodoxy" that retains a transcendent understanding of God, affirms the divinity of Jesus, and stands in awe before the resurrection. He cautions: "Our engagement with the whole of the tradition prevents us from making the mistake of assuming that our take on things is inherently

superior just because it is the most recent” (86).

Seaton argues, following Douglas Hall, that when the contemporary church quits trying to adapt to culture it will become the “salt” it was intended to be. A salty church could be a resource to those engaged in a spiritual quest. He explains that the “orthodox turn” is not about abandoning social action or disputing modern scholarship but about establishing the foundation on the basis of which Christian faith emerges. Seaton concludes that “the gospel is not an embarrassment . . . It is our life” (122). The goal of Christianity is not to adapt to culture, but to be an alternative to culture, perhaps even to transform it.

I experienced a number of difficulties with this book. I did not find the précis of Taylor’s ideas adequate enough to employ them as a lens for understanding the United Church. I experienced Seaton advancing a dichotomous perspective in which secular theology was set in opposition to the Christian story. Having visited Hillhurst, read John Pentland’s book, and attended his seminars, I’m not convinced that his interest in culture is at the cost of the Christian story. On the contrary, it has been my experience that those pursuing a spiritual quest are better able to access the historic Christian story when they are aided by cultural adaptations. Finally, Seaton’s concluding chapters are so broad in approach as to be of little use to the local pastor who might want to employ a more robust expression of the Christian story. Apart from suggesting a revisiting of ancient creeds and dogmas, there is little direction about how this material might be used in supporting contemporary disciples.

Despite the above critique, I have an appreciation for Seaton’s passion. The Christian story is unique and valuable, and has the potential to transform individuals and systems. Those telling the Christian story must not waver from establishing its essence in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Such an emphasis will serve to deepen the life of those individuals within the church and those pursuing a spiritual quest. While other social change agents might not understand the difference between themselves and a Christian, those of us grounded in the story will know that our lives have been transformed by the life of Jesus and the God-power he revealed.

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