

Touchstone

Volume 35

February 2017

Number 1

Pathways to Renewal

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EDITORIAL

The annual meeting of the editorial board of *Touchstone* usually includes some form of engagement with local ministers. These conversations can give rise to ideas for future journal themes, and this certainly was true of our gathering in Ottawa in 2015. The lunch-hour conversation there led directly to the theme of this number—pathways to renewal—and three of those present that day are among the writers for this number. We are interested in what our readers and friends have to say!

To speak of renewal, and finding pathways to it, implies that we stand in need of it. Certainly, in the formerly mainline churches there have been troubling statistical indicators for some time. Decades of numerical decline and greying memberships are resulting in congregational amalgamations and outright closures. For ordered ministers, many of whom have sacrificed to obtain a rigorous theological education, there is also the discomfiting reality that more and more positions for ministers are part-time. Ads for ministers might well include the inquiry, Are you also a tent-maker?

Despite an overall decline in numbers—of members, of those attending worship, of those attending Sunday school, etc.—there are flourishing congregations in the United Church and other mainline churches. No doubt demographics can affect what is possible in given contexts. But there may be lessons for all of us about how the Holy Spirit can bring new possibilities into existence. The articles in this number offer encouraging accounts of several pathways toward renewal.

Jason Byassee, recently arrived at the Vancouver School of Theology, questions received wisdom about a supposedly secular Canada. As a newcomer to Canada, Byassee observes that the lines drawn are far from hard. Rather than hostile or hard-nosed, people seem wistful about the faith they do not practise. There seems to be as much residual religion as there is any defined “spirituality.” And that may be an opportunity for witness.

One of our Ottawa interlocutors was Anthony Bailey who serves Parkdale United Church there. He offers an account of what he and Parkdale members found in the “Unbinding” approach to renewal. In a denomination that frequently seems paralyzed by the thought of engaging in evangelism, the image of unbinding is particularly compelling.

Another of our Ottawa interlocutors was Alberta pastor Catherine MacLean, who pulls out a family heirloom and sets it shining before us. She maintains that there is renewing power in pastoral care for both the person cared for and the pastor, not to mention the community of which they are part. Given the obstacles and distractions of our busy days, it is a challenge to carry on the disciplined work of pastoral care, including

visiting. But it can be done, and MacLean tells us what it takes.

Adam Kilner, a board member and also present at the Ottawa lunch, connects the insights of Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann to a “block party” outreach ministry in the local community. He invites us to see the dream offered by God to Israel by Moses as also being offered to a contemporary neighbourhood, and particularly to the children and young people in it who have few moorings.

Christine Jerrett has spent the last two years researching the way congregations are handling amalgamations and negotiating other challenging transitions. She understands the trial it can be for weary leaders when hope wanes, but she also sees that new ways of being church are being found through necessity and experimentation in times of transition. She believes that this unsettling, bracing time may be chasing us back to essentials.

In “Tender, Tinder-Hearted, and Rural,” Linda Yates describes what could be a case study for Jerrett’s research. Yates reports on a “co-operative ministry agreement” brought about by financial stresses, an agreement yoking two theologically divergent pastoral charges under her pastoral leadership. With a discerning touch, she relates the way that weather, a family tragedy, and a business closure all shape the context of ministry in the Musquodoboit Valley of Nova Scotia.

In our “From the Heart” section, Connie den Bok speaks in wonder about the re-discovery of prayer as a vehicle for authentic and renewing relationship with God and others. At a prairie church with a reputation for a powerful life of prayer and an outsize gift of hospitality, she encounters practices alien to her, but familiar to the ancient church. Unable to express fully to the people of her own congregation the relief and release she has experienced, she takes others in her church to this amazing church on the prairie, and the yeast begins to rise in their midst.

In our Profile, Darin MacKinnon presents one of the notable Canadian educators of the twentieth century, and one of the staunchest of Presbyterian supporters of church union. Robert Falconer was pastor, professor of Bible, and university president. After formative study in Scotland and Germany, he became a pioneer in the development of critical Bible studies in Canada, and a champion of church union.

Among the reviews in this number is one on a provocative little book written by our cover designer, John VanDuzer. *Loonie* raises some challenging questions about how we handle money, both in and outside the church.

Renewal in Theology

The theme of renewal invites reflection on the need for renewal in theology itself. We have been living in an era of de-construction and re-construction in Protestant theology, and doing so with a growing radicalism that began with the death-of-God theologians in the nineteen-sixties. Few, if any, aspects of doctrine have been left untouched, but it is again the question of how we may conceive of the being of God that dominates discussion and debate today.

Theism is frequently dismissed in such discussion since it is assumed that it entails an “interventionist” God, a God who responds to human petition by intervening with supernatural aid in the natural flow of events. However, since this conception assumes that except for miraculous interventions a purely natural order obtains, it is indebted as much to deism as theism. In contrast to both deism and an “interventionist” take on theism, classical theism sees God not as a one-off Creator but as the ongoing Sustainer of all life, continually upholding the universe in being, and not merely sticking a hand in here and there, intervening in an otherwise purely natural order. In classical theism, miracles are remarkable, not because they represent suspensions of natural law (a modernist conception), but because God’s usual way of working is through instrumentality, that is, through the agencies and events of creaturely existence. If miracles occur, they occur, not as spectacular interruptions, but as enrichments of a natural order animated and sustained in being by God.¹

The challenge with classical theism may be that it tends to regard divine providence on a command basis. No theologian has spoken more emphatically about the sustaining engagement of God with the creation than John Calvin. He insisted that God could not be a “momentary creator,” and regarded the works of creation as a theatre of divine glory. But he understood God’s intimate and ongoing relation with the creation as a function of total divine control. So complete is the divine direction of nature that “not one drop of rain falls without God’s sure command.”² It is the monarchical and somewhat mechanical implications of historic

¹ For example, C.S. Lewis describes the miracles of Jesus recorded in the New Testament as the speeding-up of recurring natural processes. Turning water into wine at Cana is the speeding-up of the annual process by which rainfall upon the earth is drawn up into the vine, producing grapes that are then crushed, with the resulting juice fermenting and being placed in skins or bottles. See *Miracles* (London: G. Bles, 1947).

² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xvi.5.

theism that are its weakness, and that drive informed critique of it.

When one turns to the Bible, there is no doubt that one meets a sovereign God, but this sovereignty does not express itself in a totalizing control. While God's power is seen to order all nature and to direct specific natural events, God also struggles with the unsubdued unruliness of Leviathan. In God's dealings with Israel we hear the divine summons "to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God," and divine pleading with Israel to turn back from unfaithfulness and idolatry. Especially in relations with humanity, the Bible depicts God not so much as an absolute monarch as the parent of wayward children.

Beginning with A. N. Whitehead, Process thinkers have picked up this biblical insight that divine power is essentially persuasive rather than coercive, perhaps even with regard to nature. John Cobb has been one of the most articulate of Christian Process thinkers and, at ninety, his most recent work calls readers back to an understanding of God as Jesus' Abba. He observes that "evolutionary thought allows us to suppose that God acts in the rest of nature somewhat as God acts in us. This action is always in experience. It does not force or compel us; instead it calls or lures us . . . Abba is at work."³

Because the vision of divine power as essentially persuasive is grounded biblically, there are evangelical as well as liberal voices articulating this revision of theism. For example, the late Canadian Baptist theologian Clark Pinnock spoke of "open theism" in addressing some of the challenges to faith to which Process theology has responded. Chief of these is the problem of evil and undeserved suffering, that is, the heavy weight of attributing the direction of all events to God when there is so much violence and brokenness in the world. Pinnock came to believe that the God who seeks loving relationship with creatures necessarily undertakes the risk of reciprocity, and is "open" both to the response of creatures and to a future that will arise out of the risk of reciprocity and that is not yet known even to God.⁴

There are others, of course, whose ideas could not be considered revisions of theism so much as rejections of it. John Caputo, for example, speaks of "the weakness of God" in a way that replaces any conception

³ John Cobb, *Jesus' Abba: the God Who Has not Failed* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2015), 45.

⁴ For an overview of Pinnock's work, see the festschrift, *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Stanley Porter and Anthony Cross (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003). Pinnock taught at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, ON for a quarter-century.

of a God who has personal presence, a God who is “Abba,” with the idea of God as “an event” or “an unconditional claim without force.”⁵ While such conceptions lean far away from the concept of God as capable of personal relationship, the summons thus experienced as divine appears to be as inescapable as the God of Psalm 139, and to represent a perseverance usually associated with personal agency.

Another serious criticism of theism is that it seems to imply that God is one being among other beings, albeit the Supreme Being. Against this relegation of the divine to an apparently finite category, Paul Tillich asserted that God must be “ground of being” and “being-itself.” So Tillich spoke about the “God above God,” God who necessarily transcends all notions of the divine formed through the limitations of finite intelligence and symbolic speech. Centuries before, we might remember, Thomas Aquinas also spoke of God as being-itself.

Such questions about the nature of the divine and the nature of God’s relationship to creaturely existence are vitally important. People of faith are also people of reason, and share with all thoughtful humans a lively interest in understanding the world, and how the knowledge of faith may relate to all other forms of knowledge. Moreover, the very practice of faith requires discerning how providence may shape our ends, and for what we should pray. *Credo ut intelligam* does not mean that we abandon the intellectual task of understanding life in its wholeness, but that we take our faith in a God who is Creator-Sustainer-Redeemer as the crucial perspective to adopt in seeking meaning. Yet it is perilous for the thinking animal to think about God, because, even if unintended, our thinking can so easily slip into treating God as an object of human knowledge. Perhaps this is why Augustine’s *Confessions* are written in the voice of prayer. And perhaps it would be a good litmus test for any theology to ask how it might sound uttered on one’s knees.

Such a litmus test for Christian theology is apt because of the practice of Jesus attested in Scripture. He prays to his Abba as One with whom he shares personal communion. If we subtract the capacity for the personal from our understanding of God’s presence in, to, and for the world, then we have departed from the practice of piety and from the privilege of communion exemplified by Jesus with his Abba.

Peter Wyatt

⁵ See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

WHAT SECULAR CANADA?

by Jason Byassee

Before I moved to BC in 2015, I heard horror stories about how secular the place was. One guestimate was that two percent of people go to church on a given Sunday. Some secular people regard Christianity as the source of every human ill from slavery to the Holocaust to male pattern baldness. My kids had previously grown up in North Carolina where you can ask a new friend on the playground *where* they go to church. Now they might have to pretend they aren't religious at all if they want other kids on the playground not to avoid them.

But I've been struck, and pleasantly surprised, by how soft the secularism is that we've encountered in BC. Sure, there's a presumption against the church's misdeeds from the ancient (anti-Judaism) to the recent (residential schools) and much of that is deserved. But we haven't found Canadians rabidly anti-ecclesial. Just passively so. Interestingly so. Perhaps even anxious that they may have left something precious behind. I'm not the first to suggest that secularism is a mission field. Or that God is always going ahead of God's people in mission, and so is fast at work long before we are. I'm just struck that maybe the Canadian secularism we've encountered in BC is a particular opportunity for the church.

For example, at the end of the year our kids' public school went on a camping trip together. My wife and I were elsewhere on the campsite as the one hundred or so campers, parents, and kids stood around a generously arrayed potluck supper. No one moved. No one said anything. Until someone did: "Maybe someone should say something." "Like what?" "Well, I bet we all know 'Amazing Grace'." So they sang it, one hundred secular Canadians in BC's interior when they felt a prayer would be appropriate but didn't know what to pray. The most beloved hymn in the English language came to their tongues, and from afar it was beautiful. I've always thought a longing for God is hard-wired into us, such that when people lack overt connection with God they miss it. And sometimes, scrambling in the dark, they find it.

What if we were to suggest that there are many, many more hymns where that came from?

My wife, also a pastor, and I were impressed on this trip by how many folks wanted to talk to us about God. "You're a pastor? Well, I grew up Lutheran . . ." and they were off. And they weren't hostile. More . . . curious. And a little sad, like something they wanted was missing. Maybe it was the beautiful natural setting and maybe it was the booze. Whatever, this secularism didn't come wrapped in barbed wire. It rather felt like a sort of sorrow.

My wife seemed especially good at drawing out these sorts of

spiritual conversations. By the end of the weekend she was connecting folks with reading groups, worship services, the works. And I wondered—maybe church is so exotic, so absent in BC as not to seem threatening? So “out” it can be “in” again?

Douglas Todd, the great journalist for the *Vancouver Sun*, told me recently that he’s seen a mild uptick in religious adherence in BC. He proffered two reasons. One, immigration is one of the great stories in world news. Many of these immigrants have strong religious identities. And these waves of people coming have made Europeans and Canadians ask themselves a question: well, what am I then? Like, maybe Presbyterian, I guess, or something. Isn’t that what mum was? This is not a strong identification obviously! But it’s not nothing either, and God is not above using such frail motivations. Two, Todd suggests that faith is indeed so weak in BC it needn’t be a threat to its non-observants. In North Carolina where I served as a pastor, folks could come to church or serve on committees because it was good for business. *Not* to be religious could hurt you in politics or economics. Not so in BC. In fact, quite the opposite: belonging to a church deemed overly conservative can hurt you in social settings. In any case, for Todd, the church’s weakness can keep people from reflexively reacting against it.

And somewhere St. Paul rejoices. The church is strong precisely when it is weak. Like Christ our Lord. He is also Lord of the world, you know.

John Stackhouse told me a story recently. Some years ago Vancouver’s Playland launched a new series of theme park rides based on Christian nomenclature: hell, the rapture, the apocalypse, the four horsemen, and so on. Stackhouse complained. The media followed up. It became a local cause célèbre. And a local call-in show on the radio had calls run 9/10 in favour of Christians whose sensibilities were being trampled. If this were any other religion being pilloried we’d all know it to be unacceptable. But Christianity has no comfortable hegemony; nor is it even a majority anymore. Therefore it should be protected by the same presumption of respect as other religious minorities.

And whatever you call that, it’s hard to call it “secular.”

None of this gets you saved, biblically speaking. It may be residual religiosity, like knowledge of the first stanza of “Amazing Grace,” some curiosity about a religion your grandma followed, awareness of Christian weakness in the face of Muslim strength, begrudging granting of respect to Christianity that we assume for the Sikhs. But they’re not nothing either. They suggest that perhaps the form of secularism we see in BC can be engaged, preached to, responded to,

and faithfully lived in. God's people have long been neighbours to worse (e.g., Babylon). Theologians from Stanley Hauerwas to Lesslie Newbigin to Canada's own Douglas John Hall have been calling post-Christendom a gift to the church for a quarter of a century. With a little time in Canada I'm starting to believe them.

Which response is more fruitful after all? "Oh, yeah, I've heard that a million times," before eyes glaze over. Or a response that says "What? That's crazy. You believe that? No way." As a preacher, give me the latter any day of the week.

My wife and I escorted our kids for their first day in their new school last December. We were handed a song sheet. "We sing these hymns this time of year," a teacher said matter-of-factly. "Joy to the World," "Silent Night," and "Away in a Manger" followed (with the dreidel song and some Santa thrown in). I knew Canada had never had the separation of church and state that Thomas Jefferson cooked up in my native America (arguably we never have either, but that's another story). And again, belting a few seasonal tunes isn't going to save anybody. But it's not nothing. And it's not exactly secular either. It's not a little like worship. And again I think Jesus' people can work with that.

McGill's Charles Taylor is, of course, the living authority on secularism. And his signal contribution is to argue against subtraction theories of secularism. When God goes away, there is not simply nothing there. It is not, as some Enlightenment *philosophes* thought, that removal of religion yields a reason more humane and universal. In fact, as G.K. Chesterton observed, if a culture stops its worship of the true God, they may become more credulous, not more suspicious. I see plenty of worship in the Lower Mainland—of the mountains, of skiing, of real estate value, of the Seahawks (not so much the Canucks)—enough to keep pagans happy a long time. But none of these things can save. And what if people *know* that? What if they indeed long for a God they can't name but whom they were born to serve? And what if it's the church's job to proclaim precisely that, from every tall rooftop and in every casual conversation?

Wouldn't that make "secularism" not a threat, but a challenge, or even a delight?

A RENEWAL EXPERIENCE AT PARKDALE UNITED CHURCH WITH THE UNBINDING SERIES

by Anthony D. Bailey

Remember what you have received and heard . . . (Revelation 3:3)

In the novel entitled *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,¹ author Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells the story of a small town in South America called Macondo. This town was surrounded by a swamp, which accounted for its solitude. One day a little girl wandered into Macondo. She was fleeing her village, where an insomnia-causing plague had broken out. Hospitably, a family in Macondo took her in. The family soon noticed that one of their daughters couldn't sleep. The plague had followed the little girl to Macondo.

At first people believed the plague wouldn't be too bad, because if you can't sleep, you have lots of time to do other things. But they soon discovered another tell-tale symptom of the plague: loss of memory. People began to forget things such as the names of tools they worked with and where they put them. They fought this loss of memory by marking things with their respective names, so that all they had to do was read the inscription to identify the items: table, chair, clock, door, wall, tree, pan, cow, pig, and so on.

Later it occurred to them that they might forget what those things were for. So they made the signs more elaborate. The sign they hung around the neck of a cow read, "This is a cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk."

To ensure that they never forgot where they were, the people erected a sign where the road emerged from the swamp. The sign read, "This is the village of Macondo." And on the main street, where everyone would see it, they erected a larger sign that said, "God exists."

Amnesia

I have wondered if, in the mainline tradition of the Christian church, we have not cultivated a kind of amnesia that renders it difficult to find our way. Anxiety about shrinking numbers and less revenue, congregations closing, and institutional survival seems to undermine sustained and faithful discernment. We spend a lot of time and ink trying to define how we are not like other parts of the Christian family. In the book of

¹ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

Revelation—yes I know, even mentioning this biblical book will get some readers’ defences up—the church in Sardis is told to “remember, therefore, what you have received and heard.” They are also told to “wake up.” Do we remember that we have received and heard a gospel of good news about God’s republic of love, inaugurated by Jesus the Christ? Do we remember that we are meant to be a missional community of “sent ones,” empowered by the very Spirit of God to bear witness in “word” and “deed” to this gospel and this Christ (Acts 1:8)?

The early Christian movement proclaimed and enacted the gospel: they evangelized. Many in so-called mainline church families are not persuaded that it is appropriate to “evangelize” anymore—no matter how one understands this undertaking. This is understandable in light of the fact that far too often, historically, evangelism went hand-in-glove with colonialism, exploitation, violence, and forced acculturation. Further, television evangelists are what most people think of when the word is mentioned. However, a wholesale abandonment of the relational, humble, loving, and respectful sharing of the “gospel of Jesus Christ” is a dereliction of our Christian calling and an egregious disservice to others. I remember, back in 2003 I believe, representing the United Church at a World Council of Churches event in Geneva called “Overcoming Racism.” A challenge was issued to the church in the North and West by Moses, a pastor and an activist who was also a Dalit (formerly called “untouchables” according to the Hindu caste system). He told the gathering that eighty per cent of the twenty-five million Christians in India are Dalit. He said the reason for this is that, as victims of profound systemic racism, abuse, maltreatment, and marginalization by the dominant religious system—Hinduism—the Dalits responded to the evangelistic message of Christianity. Why? They found in Jesus a tender engagement with, and vital prophetic advocacy for, the outcasts and untouchables of his day. This was immeasurably appealing, liberating, and life-giving. He urged and pleaded with the gathering not to abandon compelling and respectful evangelism.

How the “Unbinding” Series Came to Be

Martha Grace Reese, the author of the *Unbinding the Gospel* series, is a researcher, corporate lawyer, congregational pastor, and church consultant. She initiated and gave leadership to four national Lilly Endowment projects in evangelism and congregational transformation. The *Series* emerged from two of these initiatives. The first, the *Mainline Evangelism Project*, studied highly effective evangelism in mainline churches across the United States and included 1200 interviews. The

Unbinding the Gospel Project provided coaching support to over one thousand congregations as they worked with the Unbinding series.

Martha did not grow up in the church and knew very little about the Jesus of Christianity, but by her own account, became a Christian in Spain as a college student, where brilliant evangelical fellow students nurtured her through her first year as a Christian. She recounts that she was evangelized and experienced first-hand the transformational experience and joy of becoming a Christian that many of us who have grown up in the church undervalue; this discovery, reinforced by research, is what provides the underpinnings for the Unbinding Series she developed.

Prayer and Discernment

For a few years after my sabbatical from Ottawa's Parkdale United Church (PUC) in the spring and summer of 2007, PUC explored a few creative initiatives in our congregational and missional life. This included monthly evening experientially-based informal worship gatherings and conversations, increased collaboration with Habitat for Humanity and other organizations, as well as helping in the coordination of some new local neighbourhood events with community associations. My sabbatical had involved visiting and living in intentional Christian communities in various cities in North America, including the well-known Simple Way in Philadelphia. I spent eight days living and working in the neighbourhood, as well as worshipping with Shane Claiborne and members of his north Philly community ministry.

Through continuing engagement in pastoral work, community justice ministry, and conversations about the direction of the church with people online and at conferences, something began to coalesce on the horizon of my prayer and reflective practices. People in the church and outside of the church seemed to be craving more authentic relationship and conversations about spiritual things, but for various reasons felt inhibited. "I love working for justice, but I'm a little fuzzy about ultimately why I do this, and how do I sustain it over the long haul?" said someone to me. "I have had an incredible experience with Jesus, Anthony, but I can't tell anyone in my family or my friends," another person said. "Who made the rule that you shouldn't discuss politics or religion in the workplace? After the weekend some of my co-workers come in on Monday and tell everybody about their drunken escapades and the sex they have had . . . and on and on. I want to tell them about a new insight of faith I got from the sermon on Sunday; but I feel like I am not supposed to talk about that," another person reported in a pastoral

visit.

In the winter and spring of 2011, I embarked on a protracted time of prayer and discernment about how I was being called to respond to what I was hearing. What leadership was I being called to offer? I discerned that I was being led to undertake a transformational project with the PUC congregation. But what? I spent many months praying about this and exploring various possibilities for congregational small groups. At an event in the Hamilton Conference of the United Church, I met someone who introduced the Unbinding the Gospel series to me, and I felt a spiritual “Aha.” I called Martha Grace the next day and spoke with her at length about UTG. Then I invited my two ministry colleagues to join me for a half-day-away prayer retreat to discern if this was what we in fact were being called to. Afterwards, we agreed it was.

Moving Forward

I presented the proposal to the church council for further reflection and a commitment of support. This was granted. In the fall of 2011, PUC embarked on its Unbinding journey with a pilot group of nine participants, most of whom were experiencing various levels of reluctance. We set off on the road using Martha Grace Reese’s resource entitled “Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism” (UTG). Evangelism was a scary word for many in the group, but we agreed to step out in faith. The Unbinding the Gospel book was intended to be undertaken by key leaders in the congregation, however they are defined. Martha Grace Reese’s research indicated that the positive experience of an initial pilot group was crucial in personally inviting other key leaders to participate in the initiative.

Some of what we read left lasting impressions. Here are some excerpts from Chapter 3: “Children are being born to parents who have no faith tradition whatsoever. One hundred years ago you would have had to search hard to find someone who didn’t know the Christmas story. Today all we have to do is walk into the local high school.” A few sentences later: “Today, people who have never attended a church populate our neighbourhoods and work places. The next decades will see millions more . . . The thought of ‘going back to church’ when they’re in trouble will never occur to them, because they have never been inside a church building in the first place. For them, a church is an alien, possibly intimidating place—not a cradle of comfort and hope.” These insights confirmed the direction in which we discerned we were being led. The pilot group began thinking, discussing, and praying. To make a long story short, we were hooked.

After the initial pilot group study of UTG for eight weeks, we spread our wings and led another five groups through the study of Unbinding the Gospel; forty-four Parkdale “leaders” completed this study. The groups met weekly during the spring of 2012 and we soon realized that something transformational was underway. We began planning for the next phase, and a small group of seven met bi-weekly over the summer, planning for the roll-out of “Unbinding Your Heart” in the fall, developing promotional materials, offering testimonials during worship services, recruiting small group leaders, and overseeing registration processes and needs. The Unbinding Your Heart resource was a similar but expanded process designed to involve the entire congregation. The premise from the research was that if you got eighty-five per cent of the regularly attending congregation, including youth, to participate in the small groups and prayer journal exercises, then the congregational culture would change.

The Congregational Journey

The six-week Unbinding Your Heart congregational study began the week after Thanksgiving 2012, and continued until mid-November. We had thirteen small groups, led by eighteen graduates of the Unbinding the Gospel experience, meeting on various days and times to accommodate participants’ availability to the greatest extent possible. We fell slightly short of our goal of having eighty-five per cent of our average weekly church attendance, but enrolled 134 members of the congregation in this study. For forty days people reflected on that day’s Scripture reading, prayed, and connected weekly with a prayer partner for prayer, sharing, and support. Each participant also engaged with daily prayer journal prompts that were a mixture of the contemplative and the “active” (e.g., neighbourhood prayer walks). Sermons, music, testimonies, and prayers during the Sunday worship services centred on the Scripture chapter that the small groups were studying that week. We were supported throughout by a powerful prayer team of seven wonderful women, who met weekly to pray for the Unbinding enterprise and for individual requests relayed to them by small group leaders. This group is still meeting, three years later!

At the end of the six-week period, we celebrated with an Open Doors event in early December, inviting members of the neighbourhood and wider community to join us for worship and for lunch as we thanked God for having been spared from a potentially devastating fire in May, and for the tremendous community response to help offset costs of repairing the fire damage that was sustained. Many neighbours and local

merchants raised thousands of dollars to help us, in recognition of the important difference they said that Parkdale United makes in the neighbourhood. For this special service of celebration, all congregants were asked to invite family members, neighbours, and co-workers who don't normally attend church. Quite a number did this.

Given the positive response to our Unbinding experience to date, and realizing that it would be important for the small group prayer effort to continue, we continued our journey with "Unbinding Your Soul" in the winter of 2013. The Unbinding Your Soul resource is designed to support and enable congregants who had experienced the Unbinding Your Heart process, to invite friends, family, neighbours, co-workers, and "strangers" into small group conversations on faith and life. We adopted a hybrid approach to this "Year of Invitation," and encouraged Unbinding alumni who were ready to do so to extend these invitations to the Unbinding Your Soul study. In recognition of the many who felt that they were not yet ready to extend an invitation, we opened the study to those who felt that they needed to gain a bit more confidence in sharing their faith experiences in small groups and in developing a more consistent prayer practice before extending an invitation to others. We hosted eight groups totalling ninety-one participants, including eleven leaders. Approximately thirty per cent of the participants were new to the Unbinding series and many of these were newcomers to Parkdale or invitees. Throughout the entire Unbinding series, our congregational logistics coordinator, Helen Hayes, and I met almost monthly by teleconference with our coach and four other congregations undertaking the same process in the U.S.A. and Canada. The coach was a minister who was trained to assist small clusters of congregations undertaking the Unbinding initiative. The cost of this very helpful coaching was USD \$1,000 for two years.

Summary

Of the nine participants in the pilot group, seven went on to lead or co-lead the first session of Unbinding the Gospel. These seven were joined by other UBG alumni to lead, or co-lead, sessions of Unbinding Your Heart, and almost all led, or co-led, a session of Unbinding Your Soul. If all of the leaders are excluded from the total, 240 people participated in the series, 56 of whom participated in both Unbinding Your Heart and Unbinding Your Soul.

Three years later, in the fall of 2016, people at Parkdale are still talking about our Unbinding experience. New friendships were formed, multiple prayer circles were initiated, many members felt more

empowered and comfortable sharing their faith and the ultimate “why” behind their motivations and activities. Many testified that the congregation became even friendlier, our Christian meditation group has received more members, our Living into Right Relations sub-committee was rejuvenated, and prayer became a much more dominant practice in the lives of many. More people now stay for coffee, juice, and fellowship after church, and people engage with people that they didn’t know that well. There continues to be a more genuine concern for the well-being of others, inside and outside the church. Some specific small group efforts continue, including a young adult faith and Bible discussion group. Attendance at faith formation sessions has also increased dramatically.

Newcomers wonder when the study will be repeated; alumni refer to the experience with a mixture of delight, fond wonder, and nostalgia. What was it about this experience that stayed with participants so long? There are a number of things that contributed to its success. First, we learned that evangelism emerges from a trinity of relationships—honest, loving relationships with God, with members of the congregation, and with people outside the church. Second, the small group experience was new to many, and knowing that this was a safe place to share personal experiences of faith and doubt provided a much-needed outlet for many, and built confidence. Lasting friendships were formed, and former reticence in some to participate in small group studies has diminished. Third, the emphasis on prayer was critical: solitary prayer, prayer with a prayer partner, and group prayer were also new to many, but after six weeks of the prayer adventure, some good habits were formed, and many participants have entrenched a discipline of prayer in their daily routine. Through the experience, we were endowed with a new understanding of evangelism, simply defined by Martha Grace Reese as faith-sharing, a faith-sharing focused on relationships. We now see faith-sharing all around us—in our nursery, our Sunday school, our youth groups, our faith formation groups, Bible study, Habitat builds, at rummage sales, in the kitchen washing dishes, with and among our guests in our “In from the Cold” supper hospitality ministry, and not only by the pastoral staff.

Credit also must be given to the exceptional resource material: the readings, the prayer journals, the encouragement to really think about growing in faith and not only attending church and finding relationships there. Here’s an example from *Unbinding Your Heart*: “Do you tell people in your church what’s really going on in your life? Not *could* you, but *do* you?” The small group experience at Parkdale provided opportunities for people to talk about what was really going on in their

lives, and the response was prayer, lots of prayer, individually, with our prayer partners, and in the small groups. And there was healing

We undertook neighbourhood walks with our prayer partners, praying for people who lived in the houses and children who played in the parks; we went to shopping centres and listened to conversations around us, and prayed for people whose stories we heard. As a result, praying for situations around the world and for people we don't know personally has become routine. We interviewed non-church goers about their views on church and Jesus, and what these meant to them, with amazing and sometimes disturbing results. We listened and we learned. And it reinforced the need for, and importance of, prayer and the respectful sharing of faith and the reason for the hope that is within us.

Over the last couple of years we have shared this experience formally with others. Our logistics coordinator and I made a presentation to a gathering of clergy and laity from the Ottawa Presbytery. We invited them to try it in their congregations. There was little interest. However, we were invited to conduct two workshops at the Ottawa Anglican Diocesan Congregational Day. Much interest was generated, and we went on to offer presentations and support to three Anglican parishes that undertook, or are now undertaking, UTG. Then, just since the early summer of 2016, PUC helped one United Church in the Ottawa Presbytery to undertake the initiative.

Was it worth it? We think the answer is Yes. The coordination effort was a challenge, and recruiting leaders was difficult at the outset because of the e-word—evangelism. But congregational life seems different after our Unbinding experience. Exactly how is difficult to articulate fully. There is, it seems even more so now, something of what the hymn proclaims: “There’s a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place.” We give thanks to God.

SHOWING UP: THE ESSENTIAL PRACTICE OF PASTORAL CARE

by Catherine Faith MacLean

“You’re an answer to prayer,” she said. “I’ll see you at two.”

I hasten to tell you, I am not an answer to prayer. But in many ways, the vocation that holds me is. The calling to catch God’s people up into the divine dance—footsteps echoing *perichoresis*, hands held in prayer, spirits refreshed—is a privilege and a pleasure.

Pastoral care is about renewal of spirit; it affirms trust at the foundation of congregational community; it brings affirmations of worth, forgiveness of life’s hardship, and motivation for people to bring their friends to church. What are the hungers of these friends coming to worship for their first season? With whom do they fathom the echoes of holiness in their lives? Personal, attentive, spiritual friendship in pastoral care can be a significant dynamic as congregations flourish.

We are seeking renewal of denominations, ministry, congregations, and spirit. Structural change and messy church are great exercises in community. The planning and patience it takes to transform the denomination or to bring radical hospitality to young families is serious business. Often overlooked is the deeply transformative practice of pastoral care. It is holy awe to look a child of God straight in the eye and see the tear as the heart hears, “You know, God loves you,” “Forgiveness is a real thing,” “Guilt is overrated,” and “Can we pray?”

People are busy, though, and ministers as busy as any. “I don’t have time to visit,” a friend says. “It’s not my strong suit,” says another. “I have Presbytery responsibilities,” says a third. True, all of it. Yet not true enough.

It takes time

Ninety minutes with one person is half an afternoon, after the drive and making the follow-up notes. Multiply that by three and I’m well into my working hours. However, on Sunday when I speak the prayer I’ve written with those visits in mind, I know those hours have released isolation or guilt or reluctance; I see those beloved faces open in expectation of grace.

Note this book title: *Real Good Church: How our church came back from the dead, and yours can, too*. Molly Phinney Baskette writes:

First of all: pastors should never seem so busy as to be unapproachable. We have failed if we are doing this! We should be spending the vast majority of our time with healthy people and with new people. They are the ones who will really benefit from your wisdom and attention.

And ministering to them will have them ministering to others—it's a God-approved Ponzi scheme. I hold weekly office hours. I do it at a little café, 8:30 to 10 a.m., every Wednesday. I chose the Diesel Café, a wicked hipster, super-busy hub, because people go there, it's easy to get to and it's a quiet form of evangelism to folks who would not normally find themselves in contact with progressive Christians.¹

Office hours help, and social media help too. Molly offers Facebook “surprisingly, as a mode of offering pastoral care. Many, many things come up on Facebook—vocational issues or changes, death of a pet, family losses, etc.—the parishioners would not ‘trouble’ me with by mentioning it to me directly. I can then follow up online with a Facebook comment or private message . . .”²

In our practice of ministry many of us leave a chunk of time unallocated each week for surprises. All of my career I have carried Robertson Davies' advice on time: “Doctors and parish clergymen are old hands at emergencies, and know there rarely is anything so pressing that there is not time to dress properly, and drink a cup of instant coffee while doing so.”³ Thank you.

It takes nerve

“This is the only profession,” Stan Lucyk said to me weeks before my ordination, “in which you call on people anytime, for good reason or no particular reason. There's one point to seeing a dentist, accountant, lawyer, film-maker, or banker, but you—you call people out of the blue. That's what you're supposed to do. *And* you're supposed to ask hard questions.” It takes nerve to call someone out of the blue, to explain to a newcomer at church that it's your job to take them for lunch, inquire after their children, offer meaningful questions, and ask about the state of their soul. It takes far more nerve to do that than to ask them to chair the stewardship committee or tithe three percent, because you're going to hear the answer. You're going to leave lunch carrying worries about school fees, secrets of addictions, and longstanding grievances.

¹ Molly Phinney Baskette, *Real Good Church: How our church came back from the dead, and yours can, too* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2014), 49.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

³ Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels* (Markham, ON: Penguin Books, 1982), 258.

It takes showing up

Velma Kane was packing for her internship in Cape Breton. “What will I do, George?” she asked her Presbytery mentor, my father. “Three things,” he replied, “Visit the people, visit the people, and visit the people.” Knowing what makes them tick will elicit the theological, liturgical, educational, and justice work we ministers need to engage. Lillian Daniel reflects on an encounter when she was newly ordained:

[T]hey are not always actually expecting brilliance from us. Rather they are seeking a place to tell their story and to hear that they are not crazy, not alone, and not unheard. I could give that to her. Most of all, they want to hear a word from the Lord, and we are not the Lord. They hope that with our study and our training we will be able to refer them to a jewel in the tradition, some wisdom from the generations of God’s children whose stories rest in scripture and the practices of the church. They ask for more from us than the paltry wisdom of our own individual experience. And because we clergy are shaped in God’s community over time in place, we can deliver a word, on our first day at work or our last, and we can always deliver a gracious ear.⁴

It takes imagination

Kathy Hogman says that people are reluctant to have a minister visit because they work so many hours that they don’t get their houses clean. Revealing and true. Traditional pastoral practices have changed. My father published his upcoming rural routes in the Sunday bulletin: visits in the barn to hear about farming issues, prayers at the kitchen table. He kept that practice when he took calls to larger towns, publishing neighbourhoods instead. People knew he would show up. I carry on that practice, with tweaks: I go to people’s workplaces (I learn bags about real estate and chicken gynecology and university administration!), I accept invitations to join young families at dinner (and I bring wine), and I meet young adults in cafés. My congregational boards furnish a hospitality budget for visiting; one bistro ran a monthly tab for my pastoral work. In

⁴ Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 86-87.

my monthly board reports I discuss the general nature of pastoral care: conversations about sexuality and sanity, aging and addiction, fear and faith.

It takes paying attention

It's long bothered me that no one had called Margaret Laurence's protagonist Hagar Shipley by her first name since the death of her husband. Her loneliness is visceral. What loneliness, regret, or unresolved guilt might I console if I knew the right question? Here's Hagar when the Reverend Mr. Troy visits:

He prays in a monotone, as though God had ears for one note only. I scarcely listen to the droning words. Then something occurs to me.

"There's one—"I say, on impulse. "That starts out *All people that on earth do dwell*—do you know it?"

"Certainly I know it. You want to hear that? Now?" He sounds taken aback, as that it were completely unsuitable.

"Unless you'd rather not."

"Oh no, it's quite all right. It's usually sung, that's all."

"Well, sing it, then."

"What? Here?" He's stunned. I have no patience with this young man.

"Why not?"

"All right, then." He clasps and unclasps his hands. He flushes warmly and peeks around to see if anyone might be listening, as though he'd pass out if they were. But I perceive now that there's some fibre in him. He'll do it, even if it kills him. Good for him. I can admire that.

Then he opens his mouth and sings, and I'm the one who's taken aback now. He should sing always, and never speak. He should chant his sermons. The fumbling of his speech is gone. His voice is firm and sure.

All people that on earth do dwell,

Sing to the Lord with joyful voice.

Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell;

Come ye before Him and rejoice.

I would have wished it. This knowing comes upon me so

forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always, have wanted that—simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? I know, I know. How long have I known? Or have I always known, in some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed?⁵

Paying attention, we get to see icy hearts break open. If pastoral care is a fading art, we lose the chance to witness renewal.

It takes love

“Do you love your people?” Peter Gomes asked me when I was back at Harvard from my first churches in northern New Brunswick. I suddenly realized I did. All those pots of tea, conversations at the post office, visits in hospitals, and driving teenagers to basketball games: I loved them. I returned home prepared to listen more deeply and pray more fully. No longer was it a settlement charge, or even a pastorate: it became a pastoral relationship, a set of holy friendships beyond the counselling and ethics courses I had enjoyed. I was caught up in the divine dance with people I’d never heard of two years before, and I loved them. It would break my heart to leave them three years later, but you have to break eggs to make omelettes. I’ve loved every place I’ve served. I lean into God’s grace to love the people; grace holds me with people I don’t like, but I can love. Molly Phinney Baskette recently moved across the continent. “Looking forward to meeting the new peeps!” she posted on Facebook; “can hardly wait to start loving you!”

It takes trust

Trust builds when we consistently offer pastoral care: listening, offering advice when it’s sought and sometimes when it isn’t, praying, and showing up. That’s tricky for those of us who are part of ministry teams that have shrunk or congregations that are growing. A few years ago I realized I would never make the rounds of homebound visits I thought I should. I had to balance other pastoral care: newcomers, emergencies, and the calls I make out of the blue. I began writing a monthly letter to the homebound; it is by turns newsy, chatty, seasonal, poetic, and prayerful. Soon our homebound members were as up-to-date on church as anyone on the email or Facebook feeds. Representing the community

⁵ Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), 291-292.

of people who are bound together in the church, I remind them that they belong and that God is with them.

Find Craig Barnes' latest book; you won't regret it. He guides us through our confusion about pastoral identity:

The minor poet knows these people. He or she knows the unique struggles, confusions, and yearnings they carry around in their hearts because they are perceived not as people in general but as the collection of individuals who have made their way into the heart of the pastor. Over the years they have invited the pastor into enough of the mystery of their lives that it is now possible for him or her to see beyond the constructed identities of smiling faces and freshly pressed dresses that fill the church's photo directory.⁶

Getting around the congregation with consistent pastoral care means that when bad things happen, people know us; more importantly, they trust our love for them so we can get right to the nitty-gritty.

I love preaching. I love to hear it, and I love to do it. Solid preaching is a trust, a trust with God, a trust of resources, a trust with our people. Pastoral care tempers and informs preaching. David Buttrick says:

[H]old hands with the dying on a regular basis. If you would preach, keep in touch with the living and the dying. Be a faithful pastor . . . What do you do in your show-up and stand-by ministry? Often nothing, but be there, even if you feel awkward and useless . . . Above all, don't be silly and suppose you are a parish executive somehow above human tears. Who (in hell) wants to devote a life to institutional maintenance! Remember, churches don't save, God does. And ridiculous though it may seem, you are God's picked-out pastoral representative . . . Good preachers are on-the-job pastors and, because they internalize the laughter and the tears, they shape their words with tenderness.⁷

⁶ M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in Ministerial Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 26.

⁷ David G Buttrick, "Side Thoughts on Preaching for Those Who Must Stammer God's Unnamed Name," in *Best Advice: Wisdom on Ministry from 30*

It takes faith

Pastoral ministry is the best life gig in the known world. It is not a job, though I get paid for the work I love. It is a vocation, and that sustains me over the long haul. I have a few tricks, like a well-stocked library, illustrated booklets of prayers to give away, and a comfy chair in my study for phone visits. Truly, though, it's faith that sustains the dance. I look to Scripture, about which Serene Jones writes:

[T]he story provides a portrait of a God who is profoundly communal in character. God is depicted communally both as a trinity of persons existing eternally in loving relations of mutual indwelling and as the one who, out of this trinitarian love, creates the world to be in community with it. The story also makes clear that human beings are essentially communal creatures. We are called to be in relation to both God and our neighbors as well as to the world around us.⁸

We are all concerned about renewal of persons, congregations, communities, and the world. What a privilege to witness those transformations when we show up.

Leading Pastors and Preachers, ed. William J. Carl III (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 34-35.

⁸ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 155-156.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS A BLOCK PARTY

by Adam Kilner

"You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one."

John Lennon

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann uses the Joseph/Moses narrative to discuss the tension between building empires and building people. In considering the Joseph/Moses narrative (beginning at Genesis 37 and encompassing the Book of Exodus) one recognizes that the one who controls the empire has nightmares, while the one who encounters God begins to dream. Brueggemann even writes:

There is, surely, some high irony in the juxtaposition of Pharaoh and Moses. Pharaoh is a dreamer, but he dreams only of the nightmare of scarcity. By contrast Moses, who, after the burning bush, can indeed say, "I have a dream."

I have a dream of departure,
I have a dream beyond brick quotas,
I have a dream beyond the regime of exploitation
and fear,
I have a dream outside the zone of strategically
designed suffering.

The dream of Moses sharply contrasts with the nightmare of Pharaoh. It is that dream that propels the biblical narrative.¹

Today it is imperative for the church constantly to reflect and ask herself who she is in the story. Is she Pharaoh, trying to protect a way of life and a whole collection of assets, or is she a covenant people seeking to liberate a people whose lives have been reduced by Pharaoh to a commodity? The church that dreams suddenly gains the capacity to move and live outside of the empire's parameters. The church that dreams is not restricted to the rules set out by the empire. The church that dreams "can begin the daring extrication of this people from the imperial system."² The church that dreams no longer perpetuates the myth of scarcity, but sees many tremendous opportunities in front of her that expand her ability to influence the world and transform her heart.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 12.

² Ibid.

One of the implications of Brueggemann's work is that those of us who are tired of marching to the beat of Pharaoh's drum actually have alternate possibilities if only we have courage to imagine them and apply them practically. Two things local churches can do right now to begin transforming themselves are: 1) Respond to Life's Greatest Questions with Imagination, and 2) Develop Relationships of Place-Sharing.

Responding to Life's Greatest Questions with Imagination

The first two chapters of the Book of Exodus outline what appears to be the aftermath of the Joseph story cycle. In the Joseph cycle we discover how the people who would become the "Hebrews" sold themselves for food to Pharaoh and Joseph, ultimately placing themselves in the bonds of slavery.

There had been seventy descendants of Jacob, Joseph's father, who had taken their families to Egypt after a major famine. After the generation of Joseph and his brothers had died, and the Israelites increased dramatically in number, "a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt" (Ex. 1:8). It was under this Pharaoh that life for the Israelites grew harsh. In fact, considering the current political climate one almost feels at home reading the following words of the new Pharaoh: "The Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country" (Ex. 1:9-10).

This leads to some changes in policy toward the foreigners in Pharaoh's land. As the records declare: "So they [the Egyptian officials] put slave masters over them [the Israelites] to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly" (Ex. 1:11-13). In Exodus 2 the story introduces Moses, the babe placed in a basket by his mother among the reeds after Pharaoh introduced his policy of killing baby boys. He was discovered and raised by Pharaoh's daughter as a prince of Egypt. As an adult Moses kills an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew, thinking no one was watching. A Hebrew had seen the whole thing. Pharaoh eventually found out causing Moses to flee. At the end of chapter two we discover a fascinating statement:

During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help

because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them (Ex. 2:23-25).

When we find ourselves in troubling circumstances—especially exploitative relationships—who hears us when we cry? In the story, the word “prayer” is not used, but the *groanings* appear to be received by God as prayer. So it appears that an appropriate response to the question “Who hears me when I cry?” (which means the same thing as “Who cares about my existence?”) is that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob cares. The God who promised to multiply the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continues to listen in on their descendants.

This leads me to the story of a young man in our congregation. A few summers ago our ministry team at Dunlop United Church decided that every Friday of the summer for two hours we would hold what we called a “Block Party.” The whole idea was based on comedian *Dave Chappelle’s Block Party*, though significantly smaller in scale. Our philosophy for this Block Party was to create a weekly event that our ministry team could set up and take down in fifteen minutes or less, and required little work to actually run. Our Block Party was not a new invention—in fact, the church has been doing these for eons. Our Block Party has been nothing but a glorified neighbourhood barbecue with lawn games added. One key element to the Block Party is that everything is offered at no cost to participants—in others words, everything is FREE. Our tagline has simply been “To help us get to know our neighbours and to help our neighbours get to know us!”

So, to speak practically, we began the Block Party with my grill and a borrowed GagaBall Pit. (GagaBall is, simply put, the most exhilarating game on earth—a version of Dodge Ball in an octagon-shaped arena—players hit the ball with their fist and each time they hit the ball they yell out “Gaga!”). The first couple of Fridays we basically saw our own congregation show up. But by the third Block Party we started to see kids and parents and grandparents from the neighbourhood showing up and interacting with us. In the middle of that summer my colleague was away and, as I was setting things up, two young boys followed me into the church building. I had no idea who these boys were, but the one came up to me, saying, “So, do you need a DJ?” My policy is always to say yes to anyone who offers to share their gifts—especially if it requires little or no work from me. I said, “Yes!” to that young boy and within ten minutes he had ridden his bike home and back to the church

property, and was pumping out the latest pop tunes for the whole neighbourhood to hear. That kid was in his glory. As the summer transitioned into autumn that boy would show up at Sunday morning worship every week and run our sound board. In the tradition of Hillhurst United Church³ in Calgary, I invited him to become our paid sound technician as we were preparing to upgrade our sound system in the worship space. That boy, who did not grow up in the church, was baptized the following January.

When I asked this boy why he wanted to be baptized he was rendered speechless. On one hand, he had no words. On the other hand, one could see how uncomfortable he felt trying to express emotions that came from the depths of his heart. When his home life felt as if it was falling apart he discovered a people who let him explore his passion for sound systems, and the people treated him as the “expert,” giving him a sense of meaning and leadership in his work. We baptized that boy when he was thirteen years old by immersion in a horse trough. We do it that way remembering Jesus being placed in a manger among animals shortly after birth and to signify that our life in Christ is about every aspect of our lives.

This boy’s groaning wasn’t expressed in the same way as the Israelites’ groaning was thousands of years before, but both found ways to seek out whether anybody cared about their cries of despair or their search for a place of peace outside the home. That young man is now 15 years old and has been through the confirmation program, been the primary chef for our six-week “Hearing God Seminar” that happens during the Lenten season, and continues to run our sound system on Sunday mornings. He knows his church cares about his existence.

Develop Relationships of Place-Sharing

It was in the middle of a fight that author Andrew Root began to understand how relationships of influence work. His wife had been dealing with some painful issues from her side of the family, “and every time she expressed her feelings, I tried to reframe or fix her problems.”⁴

³ Hillhurst United Church in Calgary is a renewed congregation whose life is described in John Pentland’s book, *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith* (Toronto: Edge, A Network for Ministry Development, 2015).

⁴ Andrew Root, *Relationships Unfiltered: Help for Youth Workers, Volunteers, and Parents on Creating Authentic Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 16.

This really bothered her. “Stop! Stop trying to make things better! Relationships aren’t about making things work; they’re first about being together in the crap of life! It’s only when we’re together, really together, that things can get any better! Just stop trying to fix things and be with me!”⁵

Root then took his wife’s response and carried her thoughts over into his ministry. He thought to himself: “If it’s true that relationships aren’t (first) about making things better, getting them right, or making them work, then what was I doing in my ministry with these neighbourhood adolescents? I had to be honest with myself: I was trying to influence them.”⁶ He was trying to influence the youth he was working with in the same way he had tried to influence his wife about her family issues. He came to the realization that “my desire to influence them was keeping me from really *being with them*—in a truly relational way.”

For Root, in a relationship of influence, “the objective is to use the relationship to move the adolescent toward something beyond the bond between youth worker and adolescent.”⁷ I contend that this extends to other generations within the human family. Root also discusses relationships of place-sharing. For him, relationships of place-sharing are about occupying the same space as those we are in relationship with. It is about not having to quick-fix every problem that arises. As we share space together we come to know one another more deeply and share in one another’s suffering.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me: thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4, KJV). One striking thing about this beloved text is that the Lord isn’t doing anything other than occupying the same space as the one who is walking “through the valley of the shadow of death.” The rod and staff are simply there as defensive weapons to ensure personal physical safety. It is a relationship of place-sharing. Churches need to begin talking about relationships of place-sharing versus relationships of influence simply because the missional focus of the church is always looking to aid others in need.

In these days, many leaders of congregations talk about “saving the church,” and the work that was once outwardly-focused becomes inwardly-focused. Our people start having nightmares just like Pharaoh and begin stockpiling their supplies, expecting them to run out soon. The

⁵ Root, 16.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 54.

church becomes afraid of a variety of new things—new people, new ideas—and, as Thom Rainer observes, “It is rare for a long-term member to see erosion in his or her church” because “decline is usually slow, imperceptibly slow.”⁸ But for newer people it is easy.

It is critical for churches continuously to find new ways for people to gather and to enjoy the company when gathering. In terms of place-sharing, it is essential for the church to gather with those sharing the same neighbourhood because barriers are broken down. The more some people occupy the same space, the more likely they are to develop relationships that delve into the realm of intimacy—sharing the more vulnerable sides of our humanity together.

As a Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentor I have experienced relational place-sharing first-hand. One kid with whom I worked said almost nothing for the first five weeks that we met. On week six, after making volcanoes out of vinegar and baking soda, the boy began to open up. “That was so awesome! I really liked that!” and he hasn’t stopped talking since. This relationship of place-sharing begins with the opening of relational doors—ones even as little as just a change from not saying much to another person to feeling safe enough to express excitement or gratitude.

The main demographic draw at our Block Party has been children and younger parents. Now that we have been hosting them for 3 years some of those young people who started out as children have broken into their teenage years.

This past summer (2016) we permanently left a canopy out on the front lawn all summer long. Given that our church property is a Pokéstop for the augmented reality smartphone game *Pokémon Go!* our ministry team thought it would be a good idea to make sure there was shady space on the lawn. I also noticed one Friday afternoon after cleaning up after the Block Party that a bunch of the teens that regularly show up would continue sitting under the canopy. Some days I would go over and continue to engage them, and we would enter a space of conversation that I could only refer to as “pastoral” in the sense that we discussed issues of deep significance to them. They asked questions that they would not have felt comfortable asking me if they had not known me for three years. These are young people who do not regularly show up to worship with us on Sunday mornings. Some of them are Roman Catholic; some aren’t Christian at all.

⁸ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 12.

These young teenagers aren't pressured by us to become anything other than who they are. Out of that a trust has developed organically. One girl, in the middle of the summer, felt comfortable asking me to host her fourteenth birthday party in the church gym. Her birthday was on Hallowe'en. So my niece and I organized her birthday party and invited a small group of her friends, and they had a blast on Hallowe'en night. Her mother, who is an infrequent attender, showed up to worship for the first time in about a year and a half, and the following week as well. She finally approached me, with tears in her eyes, to say how appreciative she was to hear about that birthday party.

We have baptized at least four young people over the past two years. These were young people who developed relationships with our church through the Block Party, and started, on their own, simply to show up on Sunday mornings and to continue showing up each week. The numbers may sound small, but these are tweens and teens who have chosen to worship with us on their own on a weekly basis. Their parents are NOT members or adherents of our church.

In October 2016 we baptized a brother and sister who are tweens. The pair used to live down the street from the church building, but a year before moved to the other side of town. During the summer I saw the sister in worship and was surprised to see her, since I often used to drive her and her brother to worship services. So I asked her how she got to church. She says, "Oh, I walked." And I asked her, "How long did it take to walk here?" She says, "Oh about fifty minutes." I was shocked. This young girl, who was ten years old at the time, was willing to walk across the city to worship Jesus Christ with our mostly elderly congregation, and she was only ten years old!

Conclusion

The church isn't called to "save the church." The church is called to declare boldly that "the kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15), and to demonstrate it in her life. This declaration begins with a burning-bush encounter that allows the primary visionary or dreamer to envision another world and "to depart *the anxiety system* that produces *nightmares of scarcity*."⁹

I pray regularly that our churches in this country are willing to take that first step into the wilderness where we have to totally rely on God and not the empire for our sustenance. Courage, dear church. Courage.

⁹ Brueggemann, 13.

RENEWAL IN A TIME OF AMALGAMATIONS AND DOWNSIZING: MISSION POSSIBLE?

by Christine Jerrett

Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new.

It's bursting out! Don't you see it?

There it is!

I'm making a road through the desert,

rivers in the badlands. (Isaiah 43: 19–20, *The Message*)

For the past two years, I have been engaged in two research projects that have put me in touch with United Church of Canada congregations of all sizes and shapes across the country. The first project led me to conversations with people in congregations that are engaged in training their people for a variety of ministries. The second project examined the diverse ways congregations are entering into amalgamations and other collaborative forms of ministry.

I have talked with people in congregations where less than twenty people gather Sunday by Sunday. They often have not had an ordered minister for a number of years. They are hanging on by their fingertips, wondering how long they can continue. Nevertheless, they are determined to be the church in their local communities as long as they can. They are finding their way into the future one step at a time.

I have talked with people in congregations that gave up their buildings, but did not amalgamate with another congregation. As they make alternate arrangements for worship, spiritual formation, and administration, they cultivate new patterns and rhythms of church life. They may not fit the typical mold of what a church looks like, but they are living the gospel life together in creative ways.

I found congregations experimenting with formal partnerships with other organizations; congregations sharing resources and facilities with other denominations; faith communities gathering in coffee shops and pubs; house churches gathering for worship or Bible study while connecting with other churches over the internet.

There is widespread concern for the future viability of many of our congregations. They are dealing with diminished and aging demographics, the consequences of deficit financing over a number of years, and the need to attend to deteriorating buildings. Perhaps most devastating is the waning of hope as their leaders grow weary and discouraged.

It is both a distressing and an exciting time to be the church. A great many United Church congregations are facing challenges that threaten their very survival; nevertheless, I have become convinced that God is still at work in and through The United Church of Canada, moving us into God's new creation. Across the country, congregations are experimenting with alternate forms of church. They are discovering new ways of living out Christian faith together. There are signs that the Holy Spirit is forming communities of faith that are participating in God's greater work of renewing the culture.

Those signs are often small and very fragile. They are showing up in out-of-the-way places—on the margins of the church, where they do not attract much notice. Almost always, they do not look like what we have come to expect renewal will look like. The Holy Spirit's work of making a new creation can feel messy, disruptive, and energizing all at once.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the early church in Rome, invites the congregation there to see its challenges as being “birth pangs”—part of the process whereby God's new creation is born:

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. (Romans 8: 22-23)

In our own time, congregations are once again being called to serve at the “turning of the age,” as mid-wives of God's new creation. They are experiencing the holy work of the Spirit as they come to terms with an awareness that the accustomed ways of being the church are no longer working. They are experiencing the holy work of the Spirit in the changes that they are being led to make.

Indeed, like the labour of childbirth, it sometimes feels as if the church is going to die. As I was interviewing people whose congregations were finding a new way into the future, some of them said, “We have been surprised at how much we have had to give up.” In order to move into life-giving ways of being the church, they have had to let go of activities and patterns that are precious to them and deeply cherished. There are also times, however, when people have sensed that they are involved in something utterly wondrous even though they do not know

what the ultimate result will look like. Sometimes, in a few places and on occasion, they catch a glimpse of where they are heading, and they know that they are in the presence of a great and glorious mystery. In difficult and often painful ways, congregations are living into the biblical promise that ours is a God who creates new life out of experiences of suffering and loss. All these experiences are signs of grace: signs that the Holy Spirit is leading the church into something new and different.

Other metaphors can deepen our understanding of what is happening: congregations are experiencing what the psalmist called God's "refining fire." Praying from the far side of trouble, the psalmist interprets the faith community's near-death experience as God's redeeming work:

Bless our God, O peoples!
Give God a thunderous welcome!
Didn't God set us on the road to life?
Didn't God keep us out of the ditch?
God trained us first,
passed us like silver through refining fires,
brought us into hardscrabble country,
pushed us to our very limit,
road-tested us inside and out,
took us to hell and back;
finally God brought us to this well-watered place.
(Psalm 66: 8–12)

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews frames the experience not only as a refining fire but also as an earthquake that reveals what is lasting and essential:

"One last shaking, from top to bottom, stem to stern."
The phrase "one last shaking" means a thorough housecleaning, getting rid of all the historical and religious junk so that the unshakable essentials stand clear and uncluttered. Do you see what we've got? An unshakable kingdom! And do you see how thankful we must be? Not only thankful, but brimming with worship, deeply reverent before God. For God is not an indifferent bystander. God is actively cleaning house, torching all that needs to burn, and God won't quit until it's all cleansed. God himself is Fire! (Hebrews 12: 26–29)

Some congregations are recognizing that being the church in a new context means being driven back to “the unshakable essentials.” They are having to examine core issues: Who are we? Why are we here? What is important? What way of living will enable us to thrive and to be faithful as a community of Christian faith in this new context?

Walter Brueggemann tells the story of the Anglican Diocese of Cariboo in British Columbia that was forced to answer those questions quite drastically:

It was sued for a long-term practice of sexual abuse of children in their parochial schools that had happened long ago. The diocese lost the suit and had to declare bankruptcy. Penitence was seriously enacted; payments were made; serious apologies were enacted. Then the day after bankruptcy, the bishop called a press conference. He said, (get this!):

We have a book and a towel, a table and a cup. And we are back in business.

We have a book that tells the story of God’s transformative power.

We have a towel whereby in vulnerability we enact transformation.

We have a table where all are welcome.

We have a cup of life poured out in forgiveness.¹

Such a description of the church does not include many of the features people typically associate with being the church: a building that looks like a church, paid order of ministry personnel who have been educated in a formal course of academic study, programming for all ages, outreach conceived as a program that the congregation offers or as the support they give to other agencies. That kind of church was well suited to Christendom.² However, the last remnants of Christendom are now being dismantled. The cultural stability and support that made that model

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Getting Smashed for Jesus,” *Time*, 25 May 2014.
<http://time.com/110732/sermon-series-getting-smashed-for-jesus>.

² Alan Roxburgh, in *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse, 2015), 4, describes Christendom as a time when there were close links between the religious and secular elites. The churches “symbolized the public and social conscience of the age,” and provided cradle-to-grave programs.

of church possible no longer exist. The culture no longer has a reservoir of Christian faith that helps to sustain local churches.

New models of church are emerging. People are adopting new habits, practices, and rhythms of church life as they respond to the new conditions in which they are being called to be on the Way with Jesus. However, as they move into alternative ways of being the church, they soon face difficult decisions for which established procedures are not adequate. They are travelling through uncharted territory. They find that they need to have the capacity to respond and adapt quickly to emerging situations. They realize that they must travel more lightly than they did in the past. As Doug Hall observes, they are rediscovering

something of the dynamic or fluid or organic nature of the church that reflects biblical testimony to the Body of Christ . . . The early Christians did not think (as we are prone to do) institutionally. They thought of themselves as a movement . . . They saw themselves as a *communio viatorum*, a “people of the Way,” a community in transit, en route.

It is a fascinating image: to be *in via* is to exist in a frame of mind quite different from that of the institution. Everything is geared toward movement. The goal lies ahead, so you know you have not yet arrived—you are only on the way. You hope it is the right way, but you do not have certitude about that—the certitude of those who think they have “arrived.” Confidence you may have, but not certitude.³

The confidence of which Dr. Hall speaks is not confidence in policies and procedures. It is not confidence in particular programs that promise to fix the church and return it to its former days of glory. It is confidence in God’s faithful action in the world through people who follow in Jesus’ Way by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such confidence comes through attention to relationships: with God, with one another, and with the world.

³ Douglas John Hall, “Where in the World Are We?” Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Lectures, 2006.
https://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectures/Hall-Where.pdf.

The church is first of all the work of the Holy Spirit who “blows where it will.” Congregations that understand themselves to be participating in a movement cannot presume that they know ahead of time where the Spirit will lead. Their people need to be open to letting God do something new through them. This means that congregations give time and attention to cultivating the capacity for discernment rather than to maintaining an organization. They are learning to be deeply rooted in prayer and in searching for God’s purpose through engaging God’s Word, God’s people, and God’s world. As one minister said about the process of change, “We need training in the art of discernment and in how to lead people through that, not in strategic planning.”

The people also need deep confidence in one another as they encounter situations where they need to make good and faithful decisions even when it is not at all clear what being “good” and “faithful” might entail. Leaders of such congregations focus less on maintaining and managing the system, or on developing and delivering programs. Rather, they focus on cultivating practices that form people in the Way of Jesus. The people are learning to live out of deep humility and a radical hospitality toward differences. They are curating the art of forgiveness and reconciliation. Relationships characterized by truthfulness and openness are nurtured. People are committed to seeking the best for others and to blessing them. The focus is on growing people who are learning to listen to God, to one another, and to their context with risky vulnerability and bold imagination. Then, when the difficult decisions must be made, they are made out of conditions of faith and trust.

As congregations grow in these spiritual practices, the focus of congregational life gradually shifts. The horizon moves: it becomes far more expansive. The people stop being preoccupied with the question, “How can we keep our church going?” and “What can we do to attract more people?” Instead, they start to catch a glimpse that something larger than themselves and their own survival is happening. They embark on an adventure of exploring “What is God up to in the lives of people within our congregations and in our neighbourhoods? What is our part in that?”

One person described her congregation as “getting past the question of ‘What will it take to bring people in?’” Their overall goal now is not to increase the number of people in the sanctuary but to live out their faith in a new way. “If what we are doing intrigues people, they will come and be part of us. If they don’t, that will be what it will be.” They attend to the task of discerning what God is up to in their particular context. They ask, “What is the work God has given us to do to join in God’s creative, redemptive, reconciling work?” They have decided that

they will seek to be faithful to God's call; if that does not lead to their congregation being viable, then they will figure out what else God is calling them to be and do.

The churches that are finding their way into God's new future intentionally direct attention to the relationships the congregation has with its neighbours, with the community around the building in which the church meets. In Christendom, the focus in many congregations shifted inward. Although they may have supported a number of missions and social justice initiatives, they directed the majority of their energy and attention to meeting the needs of their own members. Someone said, "We adopted a 'golf club' mentality and it no longer works." They had lost sight of the fundamental reality that the church never exists for its own sake; it always exists for the sake of the mission of reconciliation and redemption that God is working in the world. More and more frequently, this core part of the church's identity is coming back to the fore. Many congregations are recognizing that they have lost touch with the communities in which they exist. They are looking for ways to reconnect with their neighbours, many of whom are now strangers ethnically, economically, and culturally. When they do reconnect, they discover that the Holy Spirit is already active, out ahead of them, among people they did not know. One minister said, "We no longer think about reaching out to people to bring them in. We are always asking, 'What can we do together with others in our neighbourhood, in the world?'"

As congregations come to terms with no longer being in positions of power in the culture, and as they recover their identity as part of a movement, they also find that they are better served by re-engaging their core stories than by developing a set of propositions and strategies. One woman said, "We do not need a 'project manager' approach. We are taking one step at a time as the Holy Spirit leads us forward into uncharted territory. We need help in seeing what is emerging. The specifics will come up as they come up." Congregations are finding that they are helped "in seeing what is emerging" as they cultivate the art of story-telling. They are learning to listen deeply to God's Story, to one another's stories, and to the stories of the neighbourhood.

A project manager approach with a set of goals, strategies, and objectives can help a congregation make technical changes in a context where the future develops in a predictable manner out of the past. However, we are in a time of discontinuous change and need to make adaptive changes. In such a context, stories are more helpful because they can reflect the complexity of the shifts and challenges that congregations are facing. They also honour the complexity of human beings and of

relationships. Good stories form people who have the capacity to respond to changing conditions and to shift course mid-stream when needed.

From the beginning, the people of God have been shaped by the stories of God's relationship with God's people and the world. Through the stories of Scripture, they have learned whose they are, who they are, and what it takes to live well in God's world. Those stories shape people's imaginations, changing not only how they see the world but also how they live in it.

At the heart of the Story is the life-transforming power of God. As people learn to engage the texts deeply, they themselves are pulled into the drama of God's salvation. They risk trusting that God is still creating, bringing new life out of our dead ends. They learn that, whatever is happening, the reconciling and healing presence of Jesus is at work. One person said, "Trusting that, I am willing to stay involved," even though her congregation's journey into the future was very challenging.

The journey toward the future church *is* very challenging. It is already apparent that the church that is emerging looks very different from what we have been used to in the recent past. It is taking diverse forms related to local contexts. It is often smaller and simpler, having let go of much that was precious but not essential. Even so, the journey is shaped by hope: dying and being raised by the grace and resurrection power of God is familiar territory for the church. At least, it should be.

TENDER, TINDER-HEARTED, AND RURAL

by Linda Yates

I knew I would come back to rural ministry. My partner Carl and I just did not think it would include one of the Pastoral Charges (PCs) into which I had been settled so long ago as an ordinand. Then, in 2005, while I was serving in a very busy urban church setting, two rural charges—Lower Musquodoboit and Middle Musquodoboit—joined in a federated ministry arrangement. I prayerfully applied for the new pastoral post and was accepted. One of the PCs has two congregations and the other has three. There would be two worship services per Sunday, one in each PC. It is a big, complicated ministry, but it sure sounded like a joyful, challenging path to renewal.

The PCs had been brought into conversation by financial difficulties. Instead of amalgamating, they chose to recognize their theological differences and unique cultures. One PC prefers “progressive” theology that reaches to the very edge of that movement. The other PC lives within a more traditional, orthodox theological world. Truro Presbytery gave them astute guidance as they entered into a “Cooperative Ministry Agreement.” Central to this agreement was a Cooperative Ministry Advisory Committee, which provides advice to the governance boards of both PCs. There was another document called “Terms of Reference for Cooperative Ministry Committee.” The level of detail seemed persnickety, but these detailed documents would prove to be invaluable in providing stability to the cooperative arrangement.

We arrived just before Christmas 2014. The landing would be a rough one. Early in the New Year I was called to a fire at the house of one of our ministers of music, Ida. In a cold car I waited with Ida’s daughter, Christine, who is the PC Office Administrator. The grim, worried expression of the RCMP officer who came to speak to us took our breath away. Even in the midst of the horror of watching a home burn down, we just knew that something worse than an inferno was being uncovered. In the coming weeks, Christine’s nephew would be charged with the murder of her mother, father and sister (her nephew’s mother).

There are really no words to describe the despair and worry that such an event creates in a close-knit rural community. Ida and Bill had been such well-known, beloved people. Christine is such a loved, valued, and respected member and employee of the church. Christine and her family came to church that “first” post-fire Sunday. Our regular attendance is about thirty; that Sunday, it was closer to seventy. The larger community clearly needed a meaningful word.

We began the service with a statement. We declared that there

would be no easy answers. Yet, living as the body of Christ in rural community, we said we have three things:

- 1) We have sacred ritual. We gather with familiar words, order and song.
- 2) We have community. We gather together: to touch, embrace, listen, and ponder.
- 3) We have the Bible. It brings words of witness that have come to us from thousands of communities, throughout thousands of years. These are voices of peoples who have known heartbreak and brokenness. Yet, they declare that the God of hope was with them and will be with us. The good news of Jesus Christ is ours to hear and to bear.

As we named these things, hunched shoulders relaxed a little as people leaned into the pain. Sometimes pathways of renewal can only be trod if the bricks of the ancient highways are exposed.

In the coming weeks, this event brought the two newly joined PCs together in unforeseen ways. There was an amalgam of church space, people, food, and volunteer effort that knew no boundary of congregation or PC. In the ensuing months, the Cooperative Ministry Advisory Committee would be tested as they worked their way through granting compassionate leave to Christine and hiring a replacement office administrator. There were many tricky decisions to bring to each board of governance, and all of them required trust, suspension of worries about scarcity and acceptance of some periodic gaps in communication between the PCs. At one point the treasurers of the various boards were brought together by the Committee to work out unforeseen complications of expenses. That meeting required direct, difficult honesty without appropriation of judgment. That persnickety document became an essential framing document for working through initial conflicting interpretations of financial responsibilities and procedural problems. It would appear that pathways of renewal also require the dry, sometimes tedious substrate of early groundwork done by judicatory bodies.

It has been just two years, but things seem to be going well. I tell the above story because it is unclear to us whether my familiarity with both PCs, combined with the impetus of the traumatic situation, caused a bond between both PCs that appears firm. I tend to think that it was their early preparatory work, begun long before I came, combined with the willingness to dialogue in the midst of conflict that created the positive relationship they have with each other. The groundwork for this ministry was actually laid over twenty-five years ago when eight United Church of Canada (UCC) congregations and one Presbyterian congregation in the

Musquodoboit Valley decided to rotate among churches during the summer months. This exposure to one another, and regular trekking throughout the Musquodoboit Valley, meant there was already a fertile field of experimentation in the church culture. The pathway to renewal requires a capacity for early, safe-to-fail experimentation.

A fruitful death-awareness

After the fire, a record-breaking winter set in. Temperatures dipped far below zero for several months. Storms were frequent and church services were cancelled often. There were many other deaths in both PCs indirectly related to this dreadful winter. Nature suffered. Starving, wretched-looking deer and, later, emaciated robins frequented everyone's yards. Many of both lay dead alongside the roads. The early morning Easter service had to be cancelled in one PC because the snow was piled up to the house eaves. The other PC, which had always held Easter Sunday service on a grassy hill, had to content itself with the icy parking lot of one of its churches.

As Carl and I drove past a snowy field on our way home from greeting the dawn with the faithful, we noticed a small, brown shape on some hay that had been spread on the deep snow. I wondered what this tiny new calf thought of the strange, white, brittle world to which he had been introduced. I got out of the truck to take a picture with my phone. He stood and sniffed at me. Three bovine matriarchs deftly, swiftly formed a triangle around him so that all I could see was his little legs under the wall of their shaggy coats. That answered my question. The world may have been deadly cold for young things that year, but the warm embrace of his herd would be this one's making.

Spring came very late. As soon as any living thing could reproduce, it did so with abandon. Chokecherries dipped their branches so low with fruit that tips touched the ground. Apple trees carpeted the ground with apples. Rabbits were myriad. The oldest among us declared that such natural bounty had never been seen before. It was as if, having endured the season of frozen death, nature decided to invest all available energy into creating new life.

When people become aware of their own approaching death, they can become creative in new areas of their lives and loving in a variety of new ways, or they can become paralyzed with fear, assuming a perpetual condition of scarcity. These have been chilly times for rural churches in eastern Canada. We are faced with depopulation, depressed economics, underemployment, and the rapid aging of the population that is left. Some congregations, faced with these harsh realities, choose to close

their doors. Others eke out an existence based on hoarding shrinking resources. They cut back hours of pastoral service, and reduce heating and maintenance until someone offers only a few hours of service on Sunday morning for the chilly few. Others, faced with death of their churches, choose pathways of renewal, which require expanding their geographical, theological, and psychological borders to consider other arrangements, such as cooperative ministry.

Assumptions of abundance in the midst of scarcity

In order for cooperative ministry to thrive, radical assumptions about abundance are needed, requiring trust and vulnerability. For example, we quickly realized that if I had to keep track of hours and mileage spent in each PC, and then report this to the respective boards, there would be no end of anxiety, stress, and arguing. Indeed this seems to be the mine-field of other failed cooperative ministries. Instead, I keep track of my total hours and total mileage. The churches decided early on that, “it would all work out evenly, if we just trust each other and trust you.” It has. We have discovered, for instance, that because of several deaths, I might have to spend all of one week in one PC. The following weeks may require community project work in the other. One PC desired more pastoral care than was designated, while the other wanted more Christian education. Each PC assumes that the other is getting what it needs, instead of assuming the “other” is somehow gaining an advantage. They are spiritually generous with each other.

Although I am only fifty-percent time in each PC, the cooperative ministry arrangement means that both PCs get the equivalent of sixty-five percent ministry in each PC. This is because I prepare only one worship service and one sermon, provide text for only one worship bulletin, make only one Presbytery meeting commitment, and so on. Their willingness to experiment and invest in abundance means they all get “more.” Yet, both PCs occupy very different ends of the theological spectrum. This means that neither of them gets everything they want in terms of prayer wording, hymnody, or preaching. They are generous with this exposure to each other’s theological preference and it is making them more expansive Christians. They retain their differences, having chosen a federated model, instead of the syndicated model that amalgamation requires. This risk-taking has freed them up to invest in their congregations and communities in new ways.

Warmth and light

Many UCC congregations in Canada are rural. The assumption that most

Canadians and Americans live in urban or suburban settings is clear in most “revitalization” materials. Renewal can only occur in rural churches if the unique context of small, family-sized congregations is honoured. The great strength of rural churches is that members know one another personally. This means that when one suffers, they all suffer. When a baby is baptized, he belongs to everyone, and their joy is palpable, even if they know they may only see him once a year. This knowledge of one another means they fight too, sometimes intensely. However, when rural congregants experience conflict, if the minister does not get over-involved, they generally sort it out between themselves. They have to; they meet one another everywhere.

Thriving rural churches are tender and tinder-hearted. David R. Ray asserts that thriving small church life is all about warmth and light. Insofar as worship, pastoral care, and mission exude both, the church will thrive. He says: “*Worship so people leave feeling healed, affirmed, equipped and called.* What if the only question for the worship planner is: What can we do in an hour or so, so that God is worthily honored and each person leaves feeling healed, affirmed, equipped and called?”¹

Pity me, theological student of the 1990s! Everything I was taught concerned social justice and fighting the good fight on behalf of the oppressed everywhere. I was equipped for riling up the faithful troops only to be met here with confused, sad faces, after my best riling-up sermons. Those sermons belonged in a more urban/suburban setting, where, in fact, they did very well. In a rural setting they simply deflated the room. It is very difficult to exude warmth and light when riling. This is not to say that social justice is not a concern of small, rural congregations. It is just that they need to experience warmth and light. Then, equipped, they go forth to live it.

Any rural church that experiences renewal has one consistent trait: it is focused on connecting to the community. Clergy call this being “mission-oriented.” Congregants call it “just doing the decent thing” for their local community and the wider world. Part of the task of leadership is to affirm the efforts of congregants in their multiple roles within the community as facets of ministry. Current church revitalization literature encourages small churches to take up local outreach projects as a means of growing. For many rural churches, this is simply not possible. Such literature can make them feel that they have failed because they do not have the capacity. Robert Warren says it is a mistake to impose this

¹ David R. Ray, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 116.

unreasonable expectation on small and healthy congregations:

Smaller, often rural, churches may be richly involved in Christian mission without setting up a single organization . . . Not only do they not have the resources to run things such as a luncheon for the elderly, but it would be counter-productive to do so. Their role, rather, is to join with the village groups running such activities. In these situations the church is not called to be *light* (with its own visible structures) but rather *leaven* (hidden within local activities). However, this call to be leaven is not just “a nice picture,” it is a serious piece of work.²

This serious work is also a form of evangelism. Helping congregants to understand their daily community work as evangelism is another mark of a renewing church. People need to feel comfortable in their church skins outside of the church. In *Resourcing Rural Ministry* Simon Martin explains that, “At its heart, the essential elements of evangelism are straightforward—to know those without faith; to live a life different and attractive enough to invite interest; and to be able to explain our story and what the good news actually is.”³ In other words, to be part of a church means a choice has been made to live life in a certain way. The light of the evangelism might simply be explaining, as you sit on the local health board, that you are there offering your services partly because your faith calls you to do so.

When the ashes are still warm

The British experience of rural ministry is probably closer to the Atlantic Canadian context. The British have experienced secularization at a much deeper level, and cooperative arrangements among congregations are becoming the norm in rural England. My five-congregation arrangement would be considered luxurious! British denominations aim for full-time employment of clergy whose focus is supporting and equipping the laity.

Multi-point ministry requires a specific orientation. Some clergy are not cut out for it. Jill Hopkinson observes: “Commonly, groups of churches are thought of as being organized around one or more ministers

² Robert Warren, *Developing Healthy Churches: returning to the heart of mission and ministry* (London: Church House Publishing, 2012), 122.

³ Simon Martin et al., *Resourcing Rural Ministry: Practical Insights for Mission* (Abingdon, U. K.: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015), 105.

rather than as churches present in different communities for the benefit of the people, which are served by the same minister or ministers.” This misperception in the minds of most people belies the true purpose of multi-church groups, which is to facilitate worship and mission.⁴

The British rural church experience spans millennia of tumult. Adaptation, acceptance, and a kind of impervious optimism are replete. At the Rural Ministry Course at the Arthur Rank Centre, I learned one of the great strengths of rural church is that they are uniquely placed to provide ritual, hope, and connection when significant events occur.⁵

The Musquodoboit Valley experienced the closure of its Cooperative Store (Coop), created by local farmers more than eighty years ago. It was the only grocery store in the Valley. The UCC congregations worked with Roman Catholics, the Coop Board, the schools and the Bicentennial Theatre to create an ecumenical service. In this Service of Closure, the story of the Coop was told, photos were displayed, staff was honoured, and everyone received a certificate with his or her Coop number. We were able to assure them that a copy of the service order, the photos, the children’s art, and the written history would be preserved in the Maritime Conference Archives. The people who came declared it to be healing and hopeful, enabling them to move into a place of accepting that “something” would come next.

Since the loss of the Coop amplified the sense of the dwindling of local resources in the Valley, we decided to include some asset-mapping in the service. We took topographical maps, passed out heart-shaped “stickies,” and invited people to write on each heart the name of a group/business/institution that they considered to be a strength of the community, and then to place the hearts on the maps. Members of our two PCs together contributed the names of eighty-two separate entities! It is our goal to have church volunteers call these businesses and agencies, explaining that the congregations appreciate what they do. Volunteers then will ask the following questions, “What are your joys?” “What are your challenges?” “What are your hopes?” in order to include the expressions of gratitude and concern in our pastoral prayers. This has equipped our people to express their faith publically (light) and also to provide encouragement (warmth) to the community.

It is the role of the church to provide spiritual, hope-filled centering in times of stress and crisis. The rediscovering and claiming of this role is leading to renewal.

⁴ Jill Hopkinson, “Multi-church ministry,” in Martin et al., 44.

⁵ <http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk>.

FROM THE HEART

SURPRISED BY PRAYER

by Connie den Bok

My mother dutifully prepared her children to say grace on command at my grandparents' table. Barely able to see over the plate we clenched our eyes and spoke in the rhythmic bouncing cadence of a memorized children's poem: "God is good. God is great. Now we thank Him for this food. Ah-men!" But as often as not, what came out of my mouth was, "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Ah-men!"

To this child they were interchangeable, a memorized liturgy with holy words as inscrutable as Latin mass. Only the adults could explain why one was suitable to the occasion and the other not, because to me they were variations on a theme, as was the Lord's Prayer repeated each morning at school, as was the national anthem. They were transcendent rituals full of meaning, but by the time I cared about meaning, rituals had lost their cachet, and I no longer cared for prayer or patriotism or poetry for children.

Public prayer has often felt the same, words channelled from a written page through my voice to the congregation; words ostensibly directed to God but as often to the congregation, exhorting them to greater effort, deeper regret, more correct response to the issues of the day.

The Apostle Paul recalled that when he was a child he thought like a child, spoke like a child, and reasoned like a child, but when he became an adult he put away childish things (1 Cor 13:11). It raises the question: What are those childish things that inhibit adults from bowing heads with loved ones, or lifting holy hands with the Psalmist in heartfelt thanks, in thoughtful reflection, in confession of failure?

Does adult prayer express our longing for the days we could ask whatever we wished of Santa? Can a conversation between the Almighty and the people of God be scripted from the internet and read from a lectern on Sundays? Do thirty-second silences measured by the minister's watch count as meditation? And what were we thinking in the 1970s when we introduced contemporary liturgies like, "O God, you are so very very big and we are so very very small"?

If the church is a partnership between human and divine, spiritual disciplines are the interface by which one communicates with the other. If we begin with Karl Barth's naming of God as "Wholly Other," the practice of prayer and meeting the Divine in written Word are in fact communication between alien species. God and we are so far removed

from one another that the prophet Isaiah describes our respective ways as distant as the unreachable heavens from the dusty ground of earth (Isa 55:9). If interaction with the Almighty is possible, how could that fail to change our lives, our churches, our world?

When God's people meet the indescribable, they tell the story. I too have a story about meeting God in prayer.

I was a hard-working minister in a suburban church with a legacy of spiritual renewal. The legacy remained; the renewal was long past its expiry date. In a single year I conducted 100 funerals from the community and congregation, the predictable fate of a church and neighbourhood built in the early 1950s. Many others sold their homes and went into retirement residences, nursing care, or just stayed home with driver's licenses revoked. The pew population grew sparse and sparser, and the remnant was cranky; very cranky; cranky in the way of an old family pet with arthritic legs who remembers chasing through fields in pursuit of rabbits.

Visitors could not have known whose pew they occupied, but they were told. Parents of young children could not have known how faulty their children's public behaviour was, but they too were told. The minister (me) could not have raised the dead to life, but the not quite unspoken assumption was that I should do something about "it." In truth I had checked out with my heart and soul, but not my body or hours spent working. Energetic lay leaders independently proposed alternate visions of the future, each with his or her own agenda and following, each unable to gain critical support. I the pastor was almost resigned to a long dreary road to retirement—but even that was just out of reach, too distant to be a solace.

A friend invited me to a weekend retreat in a church I had never heard of, in a town I'd never heard of. They were evangelical; so I held little hope of anything beyond the usual platitudes and sparkle: some mish-mash of pop theology, pop psychology, self-congratulation, and comfy seating instead of hard oak pews.

I was not disappointed with the comfortable seating but I was surprised at the rest. Embedded in it all were alien practices I had heard of, but never experienced: an anonymous confession liturgy in groups of three, healing prayer for body and soul, the breaking of chains, and freedom. I came home unable to express exactly what had transpired in me, but something had happened and I wept for weeks—not sadness exactly, but tears of release, relief, and healing. Something had happened, but I was at a loss to articulate what it was. My fumbling words failed to describe the thing that had happened somewhere deep in my life.

Over two years I invited eighteen people from our church and almost a dozen colleagues to pay their own way to a rural prairie town they had never heard of, to a church that carried a stigma of disrepute in the way of rapidly growing churches in fishbowl small towns under scrutiny from neighbouring clergy. My people went on the word of their pastor who hadn't been able to lead their church anywhere, or articulate what had happened to her. They came because they observed something visibly significant that transcended social class and political alignments—which are noticeably different in that corner of the theological and physical world.

Somehow this little prairie movement has hatched a revival of ancient spiritual practices, a renaissance of simplicity that sounds trite on paper. I hesitate to name them for that reason, but here they are: humility through confession of our shortcomings to strangers like ourselves and declaration of God's loving pardon, generous hospitality with no expectation of payment, Listening Prayer, and mentoring groups funded by those giving, not those receiving.

The movement lacks sparkly charisma, a profitable business plan, and the kind of innovative breakthrough of *the next big thing*. There is nothing useful on the internet that describes what is happening and what is there conveys almost nothing of the movement's heartbeat. There are no materials available for purchase. These are only given away free of charge to those willing to be mentored in the practices of listening prayer, confession, corporate prayer, and character formation: the double helix of catechism and praxis in the early church.¹ If Menno Simons and Ignatius of Loyola had a lovechild, I imagine it would look something like this.

I feel like Alice on the other side of the looking glass. What monthly prayer gatherings have wrought in my church has reversed our reality. The congregation has a different heart, a different personality. The grumbling, mumbling, background soundtrack has almost rotated off the play list. Our leaders are aligning along common vision and focus.

Like other historic restoration movements, much of what we do seems unsophisticated. There still is a glaring absence of ministerial brilliance, entrepreneurial genius, or exceptional organizational skills. Our church offered the same retreat our people experienced out west, together with a half dozen other United Church teams present and the response was staggering—or, more accurately, humbling. I cannot

¹ Allen Krieder, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

explain exactly what is in the water, only that it is a life-giving beverage.

Just as the forest by my home in southern Ontario was dry as tinder after a summer of drought, with leaves crackling brown on their branches and high crowns already dead and naked before season's end, so dry is the church from lack of prayer. We can no more generate God-connected prayer than rain from the heavens because neither is an act of will, a program, an earned academic credit, or a pious wish for yesteryear.

Spiritual practices are like domestic skills passed one to another through relational networks. It is their domesticity, their closeness to daily routines, their value to the ones who patiently love us into the kingdom of God that form our habits and personhood. We are learning that corporate prayer births individual prayer, and changes us as a people.

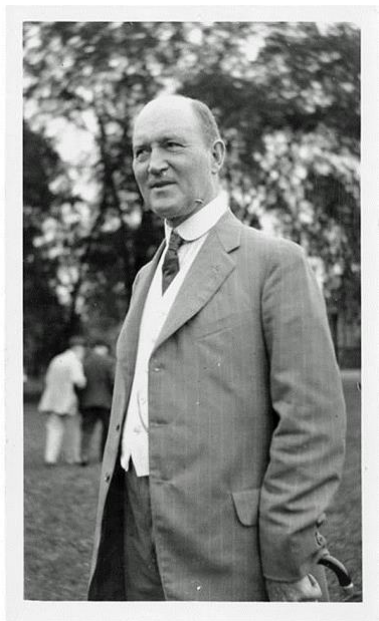
Jesus joked that a rich man could no more squeeze his ample attributes into the kingdom of God than a camel could slide through the eye of a needle. Some of us were in that wealthy generation of church with buildings, budgets, and burgeoning pews. We were the church that was too big to fail. The future looks different today. Humbled people might turn to God as prophets have urged through the ages, and echo the earliest disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1).²

² With the generous support of the New Ministries Fund of the United Church, prayer workshops will be offered at Dominion-Chalmers United Church in Ottawa, 25 March 2017, and at Rendez-Vous in Montreal, 16-19 August 2017, as well as monthly prayer gatherings in Toronto: March 1, April 12, May 10, and June 7 at Alderwood United Church. Alderwood United Church in Toronto is offering a Church Renewal Retreat, 21-22 October 2017, as is Southwood United Church in Calgary, dates TBA.

PROFILE

A KNIGHT TO REMEMBER: SIR ROBERT FALCONER, CHAMPION OF CANADIAN CHURCH UNION

by Darin J. MacKinnon



This year marks the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Confederation, and also of the birth of Robert Alexander Falconer, a trail blazer who had immense influence on the intellectual and religious culture of Canada. As the only member of the first General Council of The United Church of Canada to have a British knighthood and a mountain named after him in Antarctica,¹ he had a dynamic career as variously, a preacher, lecturer, theological college principal, and university president. He would reorganize the University of Toronto as its fifth President in 1907, help found the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada in 1911, and become the first

president of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies in 1933. His idealism made him seek unity amid diversity, and his keen sense of history informed him of the power inherent in co-operation. Falconer, despite his Scottish heritage and education, was an influential and unapologetic unionist Presbyterian who favoured the creation of the United Church in 1925 as a worthy national and spiritual project.

Robert Falconer's ecclesiastical career was shaped by both sides of his family. He was born in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, on February 10, 1867. His maternal grandfather, the Rev. Robert Douglas, had served as a pioneering missionary in eastern Prince Edward Island from 1821 until his death in 1846. Undaunted by challenging travelling conditions—being dug out of snow drifts and pulled from the water when he plunged through broken ice—he was named the first Clerk of the PEI

¹ This was named by Sir Charles Seymour Wright, a University of Toronto graduate, who was part of Captain Robert Scott's expedition that reached the South Pole in January 1912.

Presbytery when it was formed in October 1821. Born in Jedburgh, Scotland and educated in Edinburgh, he was most likely Robert Falconer's namesake. Robert's own father, Alexander Falconer, was born and educated in Pictou, Nova Scotia, before completing his theological training at New College in Edinburgh, Scotland. Alexander's first appointment, in 1862, was as the first minister of the newly constructed Queen Square Presbyterian Church in Charlottetown. He married Prince Edward Islander Susan Cullen Douglas, daughter of the aforementioned Robert Douglas, in 1865.

Along with Robert, the Falconers had a son, James, who also became a Presbyterian minister, and a daughter, Jean. In 1869, when he transferred to the Halifax Presbytery in Nova Scotia, Alexander took his family to St. James' church in Dartmouth at a pivotal time in Canadian Presbyterianism. As an early amalgamation on PEI had demonstrated, there was by the 1870s a desire among Presbyterians to reunite "the fragments of Knox's kirk,"² and Alexander was at the forefront of this movement. In 1873, he served as the Clerk of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces. In 1875 he was part of the negotiating team that met in Montreal, leading the way to the creation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. He was joined by other Presbyterian leaders, including George M. Grant, who would go on to become a leading figure in the development of Queen's University.

Within a year, the Falconers were on the move again, this time to Trinidad in the Caribbean. Alexander assumed the helm of Greyfriars church in 1876 and enrolled both his sons, Robert and James, in Queen's Royal College, a British style prep school. Robert proved a strong student whose background knowledge of the classics greatly aided him in this new setting. He won the coveted Gilchrist Scholarship, enabling him to enroll in a British university. Soon the family was off again, this time to Edinburgh, where the Falconer brothers studied in the classical honours program from 1885-1889.

Upon graduation in arts, the brothers repeated family history by applying to the Divinity School of New College, which their father had attended. Among their classmates was fellow Maritimer Clarence MacKinnon, from Hopewell in Pictou County. However, Robert Falconer was not content with the quality of teaching he was receiving. "All too often," he lamented, "scant attention was paid to the original meaning of words or to the historical environment in which they had been framed."³

² James G. Greenlee, *Sir Robert Falconer* (University of Toronto Press, 1988), 9.

³ Greenlee, 31.

He and other students believed they were not being adequately prepared for the rigorous challenge that modernity was posing to traditional theology. One exception was the weekly Sunday evening lectures of Professor Henry Drummond.

Drummond sought to bridge the gap between science and theology. He had been trained as a scientist, but began writing about theological subjects, where he argued that, like natural selection, Christianity was a developmental process. He wrote books with titles such as *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* and *The Ascent of Man*. Robert Falconer claimed that Drummond helped “clarify my conception of essential Christianity.” He learned that “the man of faith . . . ignored the claims of reason only at his peril.”⁴ Falconer was learning that he needed to apply his many intellectual gifts to his faith, and to do so was not a threat to belief, but a necessary step in the unfolding world of the late nineteenth century. Drummond’s views would be influential among other Presbyterians who would later support church union.⁵

The antidote to the theological conservatism of Edinburgh was evolving in the intellectual tumult of Germany’s universities. There, the development of higher criticism, which used historical-critical methods to re-examine the Scriptures, proved enticing. In April 1891 Robert, James, and fellow Canadian Walter Murray ventured to Europe to study in Berlin and Marburg, where they encountered the work of the great scholar Adolf Harnack. Harnack was critical of the damage dogma could do to a genuine living faith, which he claimed could only “be found through personal inner experience rather than in external conformity with any given doctrinal or theological position.”⁶ Harnack espoused the need for a social gospel and gave the synoptic gospels more credibility than the Gospel of John, which he said had many historical problems. He also questioned the validity of reading the miracles of Jesus as literal events, but did not deny that they may have been interpreted as such.

This perspective came as a breath of fresh air to Robert Falconer. Harnack’s “tolerance, breadth of vision, and capacity for synthesis”

⁴ Greenlee, 28.

⁵ PEI’s John Matheson MacLeod was a student at Princeton in 1887 and was reading Drummond. J.M. MacLeod was one of two PEI Presbyterian commissioners to the first General Council of the United Church in 1925. Scholars say it was unusual for future unionists to have been educated at the more theologically conservative Princeton.

⁶ Greenlee, 42.

captivated him.⁷ He became convinced that “religion and historical inquiry might comfortably live together.”⁸ After spending a year soaking up the intellectual *zeitgeist* of Germany, Falconer returned to Edinburgh to graduate on April 14, 1892, with his Bachelor of Divinity degree. He was ready to return to Canada imbued with liberal Protestant ideals. Yet, it would not be from the pulpit but from the lecture hall that Falconer would have the greater impact.

Pine Hill Divinity Hall in Halifax appointed Falconer as lecturer in New Testament Greek and Exegesis in 1892, and he was ordained on November 2, 1892 at Chalmers Church. Pine Hill was the Maritime educational centre for future Presbyterian clergy, and many saw his appointment as a sign that the church was willing to embrace the new learning that was unfolding in Europe. As a twenty-five-year-old recent graduate, Robert would put a youthful face on theology for a new generation.⁹ Indeed, enrolment steadily climbed in the 1890s, and Pine Hill extricated itself from a worrisome debt. Falconer also acted as fundraiser for the school, travelling around the Maritimes. In 1897 he married Sophie Gandier, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister from Newburgh, Ontario. They had two sons.

In 1904 Pine Hill named Falconer its next Principal. In a lecture series published that year by the International Committee of the YMCA, entitled *The Truth of the Apostolic Gospel*, Falconer continued to assert that there was no conflict between “Reason” and “Faith.” He noted:

Now we are conscious that our moral and spiritual nature is our noblest possession. We find then the supreme Reason in that which harmonizes our experience and coordinates our life in their widest range. Just as we trust our faculty of pure thought in order to arrive at the truths of natural science or of the mind, so we trust our moral and spiritual faculty to manifest to us the truth of the spiritual realm.¹⁰

To Falconer, the Gospels were not alien to the modern mind, but could stand up to the scrutiny of critical inquiry without losing their central and

⁷ Greenlee, 44.

⁸ Greenlee, 45.

⁹ Greenlee, 52.

¹⁰ Robert A. Falconer, *The Truth of the Apostolic Gospel* (New York: International Committee of the YMCA, 1904), 2.

ageless message. He concluded that “man shares the knowledge of God in His conscience. He can know the truth and therefore is in duty bound to exercise faith.”¹¹ Falconer’s theology embodied the optimism and idealism of the Edwardian age.

It is not surprising that Falconer’s penchant for intellectual integration would influence his view of the future of the church in Canada. He became increasingly interested in promoting the idea of an organic union of Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists. A fellow Presbyterian, William Patrick of Manitoba College, had dared to suggest organic union at the 1902 Methodist General Conference, and sympathy for organic union was strong among the younger leadership of the Presbyterian Church who had been influenced by Scottish evangelical liberal ideas. Falconer also believed denominational lines needed to blur in the face of national stress on the Canadian state brought on by increasing immigration by non-Protestants, the erosion of rural life and increasing urbanization, and the threats these were thought to pose to social cohesion. The first joint committee meeting to discuss union was scheduled for December 1904. In anticipation, earlier that year the entire male Falconer clan (Alexander, Robert, and James—who was then serving at Fort Massey church in Halifax) were joined by their lifelong friends, Clarence MacKinnon and Walter Murray, and many of Halifax’s Methodists in a public rally supporting church union.¹²

Robert attended the initial union meetings in Toronto, and was impressed by the comradeship he experienced with notable Methodists like Nathaniel Burwash. By 1905, many of the doctrinal issues were being smoothed out under the careful watch of Burwash, who chaired that committee. At the Presbyterian General Assembly that year, however, potential opponents of union were given a technical gift when it “passed a resolution to the effect that no pledge to unite would be given without the consent of the ‘entire membership.’”¹³ Falconer would live to regret this clause.

In 1906 Robert’s father, Alexander, the champion of the 1875 Presbyterian union, was elected as Moderator of the General Assembly. This seemed a good omen for the future of union talks. Yet this assembly would prove to be contentious: the clerk, Robert Campbell, distributed a pamphlet where he openly questioned the need for an organic union. When Campbell became the moderator at the 1907 General Assembly,

¹¹ Falconer, *The Truth*, 2.

¹² Greenlee, 95.

¹³ Greenlee, 97.

anti-unionists took heart. However, he did not have enough clout to turn the ship around, as many agreed that the Basis of Union should be completed before any hasty decisions were made. Meanwhile Falconer, confident that church union would succeed, decided to change his career path. He accepted the position of president of the University of Toronto, an office he would hold until ill health forced him to retire in 1932.¹⁴ This new secular job did not, however, detract from Falconer's promotion of Canadian church union. He remained a loyal member of the union committee.

In 1908, the Basis of Union was finished and sent to the churches for consideration. It would be debated again at the 1910 General Assembly in Halifax. Falconer was too busy with union talks to attend the historic missionary conference held in Edinburgh that year. He did contribute by sending a report in which he outlined the work of Indian industrial, boarding, and day schools. Nine of the eleven Canadian Presbyterian delegates to the conference were unionists.¹⁵ Meanwhile, at home, the Congregationalist churches in Canada became the first partner to ratify the Basis of Union in 1910.

By 1912, the Methodists had also endorsed the Basis of Union, and Presbyterian unionists believed more public education was needed. One of these was historian Arthur Silver Morton, another Maritimer with a Pictou pedigree. With union talks at an impasse, Morton wrote *The Way to Union* in 1912 with editorial help from Falconer and Murray. The book argued that church union in Canada was an inevitable national development which corresponded to similar events in the past. Morton explained that the three negotiating churches had a long shared history not only in Canada, but in the days of their origins in Great Britain. By combining their collective heritage, he forecast that they would “. . . contribute towards a great and united Canadian Christianity yet to

¹⁴ Falconer's unionist friends also assumed academic posts: Clarence MacKinnon as Principal of Pine Hill in 1910; Walter Murray as President of the University of Saskatchewan in 1908; Arthur Morton as professor there in 1911; and Alfred Gandier, his brother in law, as Principal of Knox College in 1909. His brother, James, became a professor at Pine Hill in 1907 and remained there for his career.

¹⁵ Donald MacLeod, "Edinburgh 1910 and Church Union 1925: The Ecumenical Missionary Impulse of Canadian Presbyterianism," *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers* (2010), 11, accessed at www.csph.ca/papers.html.

come.”¹⁶ Expectedly, anti-unionists were unmoved by its arguments. In the wake of the 1913 General Assembly, they formally joined forces to fight the church union plan and preserve Presbyterianism as a distinct denomination. However, these theological lines in the sand were about to pale in comparison to the eruption of the Great War in Europe in 1914.

The aggressive actions of Germany horrified Robert Falconer. He wondered how the civilized nation that he had experienced in the 1890s as a place of intellectual freedom and “spiritual ideals” could now be home to the “worship of militarism” and a “gospel of force.”¹⁷ Particularly disappointing were the actions of his former professor, Adolf Harnack, who seemed to abandon his liberal ideals and become an apologist for the actions of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Falconer wrote:

We do not need to deny that this Prussian mind may be religious, but it is not religious according to the principles of Christianity. These representatives of Germany have not yet attained to the Hebrew or Greek standards; they take as their law the shifting and emergent necessities of the state, enjoying therewith the comfortable assurance that the presiding deity of the German empire is the eternal God, whereas he is not more than a national deity with morals to suit . . . That such a doctrine of the state should have been able to take hold upon the educated mind of the people shows that the old German idealism is almost extinct. Military power and material prosperity have been too much for the spiritual forces. Religion and morality are dumb.¹⁸

Despite his disillusionment with Germany, Falconer actively defended professors at the University of Toronto who were attacked and vilified simply during the war because of their German ethnicity. At the General Assembly of 1915, Falconer said that the one valuable lesson Canada could learn from Germany was the importance of “heightened efficiency.” He believed the war was encouraging a new nationalism within Canada that was insisting that “we must stop the waste of our

¹⁶ Arthur S. Morton, *The Way to Union* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1912), 51.

¹⁷ Robert A. Falconer, *The German Tragedy and Its Meaning for Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1915), 58-59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14, 65-66.

moral and spiritual resources.”¹⁹

By 1916, Falconer and others believed that unionist momentum was ebbing away, and “advised the General Assembly” meeting in Winnipeg “to commit itself firmly to the cause but leave the date for merger open,”²⁰ a motion that Falconer seconded.²¹ This shrewd move committed the Presbyterians to union, implying that it was only a matter of time. These were precarious days for the union movement and Falconer was named convener of the union committee, a post he would hold until 1921. Falconer believed union could not occur until the war in Europe was won. In the meantime, he encouraged unionists to adopt the tactics of the anti-union side and begin promoting the merits of their cause through pamphlets and public lectures.

The 1917 General Assembly agreed to suspend discussion on union until the Great War had ended. Canada was celebrating fifty years since Confederation and was turning heads on the world stage by its valour at Vimy Ridge. Falconer, the same age as the country itself, was promoted to a Knight Commander of St. Michael and St. George (KCMG) by King George V for his patriotic efforts on the home front. He had been made a companion of the order in 1911 at the time of the King’s coronation. In a speech at the University of Toronto that year, he said:

During this war the churches have proved themselves to be strong national institutions that deserve well of the country, because they have interpreted a moral issue to their people so clearly that their finest youth have volunteered for service . . . Every church, thrown on its own resources, has summoned forth all its latent strength, and with the good-will of others maintains its hold upon its own people by satisfying their religious needs.²²

¹⁹ N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada, 1904-1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 71.

²⁰ Greenlee, 233.

²¹ Douglas F. Campbell, “A Group, a Network and the Winning of Church Union in Canada: A Case Study in Leadership,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 25, No.1 (1988): 53.

²² R.A. Falconer, “The Quality of Canadian Life,” in *The Federation of Canada 1867-1917* (University of Toronto Press, 1917), 135.

Falconer saw the war as a moment that demonstrated the ability of the churches to co-operate successfully with the nation in a crisis.

In 1920, the battle for union resumed. The Presbyterian union committee was resurrected with Falconer at the helm. He took heart in the many “local union churches” that had emerged in the Canadian West and in the Maritimes in anticipation of national union, writing that, “at a time when the churches are craving a unity which they seem powerless to effect, the community itself may come to possess a moral consciousness which may be the saving even of religion.”²³ The 1921 General Assembly established a new committee on church union with George Pidgeon as convener.²⁴ In early 1921, Queen’s Theological College principal, Samuel Dyde, wrote to Falconer urging him to bring the extremists on both sides together to gain a compromise, but Falconer insisted that all discussion should happen publicly in the Assembly.²⁵

In 1922 unionists turned their efforts toward attaining the legislation needed for the new church. Alarmed that events were moving quickly, the anti-unionists proposed three alternatives, and became mired in a fight with Samuel Dwight Chown, the leader of the Methodist Church, who was growing exasperated with the stalling tactics of the anti-unionists. The unionists were beginning to solidify their grasp on the Presbyterian Church, electing pro-union Winnipeg native, Charles Gordon, a.k.a. the prolific novelist Ralph Connor, as moderator. Meanwhile, Falconer continued to attend to his academic career. He published several books on current affairs, including *The German Tragedy and its Meaning for Canada* (1915), *Idealism in National Character* (1920), and *The United States as a Neighbour* (1926). Yale University awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1922.

At the 1923 General Assembly, Alfred Gandier, Falconer’s brother-in-law, was elected Moderator. Church union draft legislation had already been approved by the Methodists, and the Assembly agreed to send this legislation to Ottawa and the provinces. Another Maritime unionist, Clarence MacKinnon, was elected moderator at the 1924 General Assembly. All may have seemed lost for the Presbyterian anti-unionists, but they managed to get an amendment added to the federal church union bill in Parliament. This “Duff Amendment,” named for the Lunenburg Nova Scotia MP who proposed it, would prevent union from

²³ Sir Robert Falconer, *Idealism in National Character* (Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920), 172-173.

²⁴ Clifford, 119.

²⁵ Greenlee, 305.

happening before the Supreme Court had ruled on whether the Presbyterian Church had any legal right to enter union with other churches, and whether Parliament could even pass legislation on the same. Conservative leader Arthur Meighen, a Presbyterian who would become United Church, argued that the Duff Amendment should be struck out of the bill since the courts had no role as legislators. The House agreed. Despite the efforts of anti-unionists, the bill was passed in the House and received Royal Assent in 1924.²⁶ The United Church of Canada became a reality on June 10, 1925 with the meeting of the first General Council, which Falconer attended as a commissioner from Toronto Conference. The Presbyterians in the Canadian West largely embraced the new church, but not so the Presbyterians in Eastern Canada, especially in urban centres. In Falconer's hometown, Charlottetown, both Presbyterian churches remained outside his beloved union. However, he could take heart in the election of Pidgeon, since his grandfather, Edward Pidgeon, had preceded Falconer's grandfather, Robert Douglas, as a pioneering minister in St. Peter's, PEI, from 1812 to 1820.²⁷

In the journey toward church union, Falconer was part of a key web of unionists who had much in common. They were "connected" in important ways, whether as brothers or brothers-in-law (Robert and James Falconer, George and Leslie Pidgeon, Alfred Gandier), or as schoolmates (Robert and James Falconer, Walter Murray, Clarence MacKinnon, Arthur S. Morton). They were all educated individuals who were steeped in a liberal Christianity developed in Scottish and German universities and many became academics at a time when universities were secularizing. As administrators, they were adept at managing organizational meetings. Geographically, they covered most of the country, with Morton and Murray in the West; Robert Falconer and Gandier in the Centre; and MacKinnon and James Falconer in the East. They all had Maritime roots and Scottish ancestry, and knew one another intimately. The Great War had also played a role (MacKinnon and George Pidgeon were chaplains). Together, they presented a formidable force for church union. Their combined ambition and drive made church union seem not only feasible, but necessary.

Falconer's prestige as an international academic added credibility to his arguments for union, and other unionists turned to Falconer for guidance and leadership. Although he spoke from a place of male heteronormative cultural privilege, and often through a lens which

²⁶ Clifford, 162.

²⁷ John Macleod, *History of Presbyterianism on Prince Edward Island*, 60.

supported the dominant imperial ideology, as a Presbyterian he always prized the transformative nature of education and learning, and represented this ideal at many of the highest scholarly levels in Canadian society.²⁸ Falconer would write of union in 1926: "This unique accomplishment is due entirely to Canadian conditions and was in no way the result of American influence . . . These three largest Churches have been reinforced from Britain, and the theological views that have prevailed there have been transferred to Canada." He concluded, "The churches are like bands, holding together all the provinces."²⁹

At the height of the struggle for union, Falconer explained, "The name 'United' expresses the Reformation doctrine of the Church. The Reformers were not Sectarians. They held strongly the doctrine of the 'Holy Catholic Church' . . . The term 'United' stands for this ideal of one Church of Christ in Canada . . . The name stands for a Church which shall be national, and represents in Canada the Church Universal."³⁰ Falconer, in remaining steadfast in his dream of a United Church of Canada, manifested his belief in "a Realm in which the company of those who have sought to know, to pursue goodness and to love their fellows and all things pure and beautiful, will find scope for the realization of those desires in such measure as transcends our present power to imagine."³¹

While ill health forced Falconer's retirement in 1932,³² he continued his scholarly work, publishing a noteworthy commentary, *The Pastoral Epistles*, in 1937.³³ Sir Robert Falconer died on November 5, 1943. In less than a year, on May 24, 1944, he was designated a national historic person by Canada's Historic Sites and Monuments Board.³⁴

²⁸ Campbell, 57.

²⁹ Robert Falconer, *The United States As A Neighbour* (Cambridge University Press, 1926), 189.

³⁰ Robert Falconer, *Spiritual Independence of the Church* [ca. 1921], W.D. Jordan Special Collections - Lorne Pierce Collection, Queen's University Library, Kingston, ON.

³¹ Robert Falconer, *The Idea of Immortality and Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 61.

³² He was asked to serve as principal of the University of Edinburgh in 1929, but declined for health reasons.

³³ Robert Falconer, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

³⁴ This plaque is in the foyer of the Robertson Library, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown.

BOOK REVIEWS

Myth and Gospel in the Fiction of John Updike

John McTavish. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016. Pp. 183.

McTavish, a retired United Church pastoral minister living in Huntsville, Ontario, and no mean theologian, has offered here a fine book that will be of interest to scholars of English literature, and specifically to Christians, especially pastors and theologians.

Updike is presented as an outstanding American novelist, perhaps the best of the twentieth century, who writes intentionally out of his well-informed Christian convictions. Within seven chapters, McTavish analyzes “myth and gospel” in Updike’s early and later fiction, his poetry, and his short stories. The volume is enriched by an introduction by Updike’s son; two essays by the late English literature scholar, Alice Hamilton, and her husband, the late Kenneth Hamilton, United Church theologian at the University of Winnipeg—McTavish’s mentors on Updike; a “Potpourri of Reviews” of the novelist’s work; a chapter of comment and recommendations by enthusiastic readers; an interview with Updike; and a eulogy on the occasion of his death in 2009.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal is the underlying theological content of the novelist’s fictional and poetic writings. Updike very intentionally does not preach. Rather, his books (over sixty of them) “have secrets,” which are there as a bonus for the sensitive reader, or . . . “as a kind of subliminal quivering” (x). Allegorical signals, the use of names, and biblical allusions are used as subtle clues to uncover depths of the human condition.

Updike made it clear early on that he was inspired by the theology of Karl Barth, who was certainly not an advocate of a “mythical” interpretation of the gospel. Updike admires Barth’s religion “in its original stony jars,” and affirms the historical character of the stories about Jesus. This is found most eloquently in his poetry, such as *Seven Stanzas at Easter*: “Make no mistake: if he rose at all/ It was as his flesh, ours/ . . . Let us not mock God with metaphor,/ Analogy, sidestepping, transcendence/ . . . Let us walk through the door” (126-127).

At one time, as a young adult, Updike found himself “very frightened of being alive,” and somehow Barth “eased away the fear and enabled me to go on living” (23-24). It was Barth’s biblical realism that spoke to Updike. But Barth (and Updike) knew that the Bible contained non-historical narratives, which Barth preferred to call “saga.” McTavish, in this book, uses the term “myth” to refer to the way in which Updike

uses fictional stories to illumine profound truth about good and evil, sin and redemption, God and humanity. "Myth," he says, refers to "the great stories and events and insights that have shaped our minds and colored our imaginations over the centuries" (12).

The novelist's Christian/Barthian perspective is clear and most explicit in his earlier novels, such as *Rabbit, Run* (1960)—the story of a young man, Harry Angstrom (a man of *angst*), who bolts away (rabbit-like) from his job, his wife, and child, in search of *something*. He encounters two clergymen, a Barthian (Kruppenbach) and a liberal (Eccles), whom we also find in debate about the meaning and truth of the gospel, and the particular task of the preacher. In later novels, we meet "Rabbit" again in *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), in which Updike traces, through the mundane moments of ordinary life, the movements of both sin and grace. Finally, Harry Angstrom (Rabbit), in later years, "conquers despair and is able to face death unafraid" (91). In his discussion of the Rabbit tetralogy McTavish enlightens us with a comparative study of Updike and the prolific British playwright, Alan Ayckbourn. Though the latter is not confessedly Christian, McTavish finds in his work, especially his *Norman Conquests* and the character Norman Dewers, similar realistic portrayals of domestic life, and "striking commonalities of religio-philosophical thought going on in the minds of their creators" (80).

McTavish identifies *The Centaur* as Updike's most overtly myth-laden novel, in which the protagonist, George Caldwell, is the centaur-like creature who, like all humans, straddles the boundary between heaven and earth. The epigraph to *The Centaur* quotes Barth: "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary of heaven and earth" (29). Caldwell, the kind and faithful high school teacher, is clearly such a creature, a vulnerable man, but also Chiron, the son of Chronos, the god of time; he is under the supervision of his principal, Zimmerman, who is also Zeus; but the self-giving "old work horse," Caldwell, is also Christ, the son of God. Updike's symbolism is not usually so explicit.

In later novels, like *Marry Me* and *Couples* (often knocked by the critics as below the author's usual standard), McTavish finds Updike's understanding of sex to be "the expression of romantic love, while romantic love is understood as a deeply surging force that seeks to heal a colossal metaphysical ache" (40). Updike's fictional goal, we are told, is to reflect the subtle, ambiguous, "yes-but" quality of reality. In *Marry Me*, literary allusions link the male and female characters to Adam and Eve. Romantic relationships occur within creaturely limitations. "We are

not God . . . Our love is always a human and limited love . . .” (46).

This remarkably rich book, so nicely put together, is well worth reading, especially as it encourages us to seek out and read the novels, short stories, and poems of this finest of Christian authors.

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The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ

Fleming Rutledge. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015. Pp. 669.

Fleming Rutledge, a renowned homiletics teacher and American Episcopalian priest, has presented us with a weighty book indeed. It is not just a “big book”; it is a book weighty with content from beginning to end.

From the very first page Rutledge states the very thing that should be obvious to every Christian, especially those entrusted with preaching the gospel: “Christianity is unique . . . No one in the history of human imagination had conceived of such a thing as the worship of a crucified man” (1). Thus does Rutledge begin the arduous journey across the breadth, and through the depth, of Christian history, traditions, theology, and biblical studies, making frequent stops to consider current events and cultural phenomena that are illumined by this very uniqueness.

This is not a quick read. Rutledge employs footnotes reminiscent of Karl Barth’s “small print” to elucidate references and contemporary events. She seems to anticipate almost every argument and, in a dialectic fashion, takes an unsentimental razor to every one of them. The consistent and continuing depth presented, paragraph by paragraph, frustrates any attempt to read fluidly or critically. One is simply swept up in the panorama of topics, ranging from excruciating details about crucifixion itself (“a godless, irreligious death for the godless; ‘the death of beasts’”) to the precise and elusive, yet essential, concept of atonement. The reader is thus brought to the elegance of Anselm, who is yet to be understood in a modern/post-modern world.

There are explorations of precise linguistic nuance, and the primacy of God’s righteousness described by the genitive form of *dikaiosyne*, which is cited as a key concept throughout the last half of the book. It is understood as a *power*, not an attribute to be admired or

emulated; it is “the righteousness of God . . . God’s powerful *activity* of making right what is wrong in the world . . . The righteousness of God is the active, re-creating power that enables the new life of obedience to take shape” (328). The initiative in all things, then, is always God’s, and not that of the human creature.

Rutledge also provides us with guided tours into scriptural descriptions of apocalyptic war, the descent into hell, and the impossible subject of the existence of evil which she describes as a *power* that is in creation, but not a part of it (526). Exercising a muscular biblicism, which she understands as being metaphorical and symbolic, combined with an almost unprecedented ability to survey the wisdom of complex theological structures from the patristic age to the twenty-first century, Rutledge repeatedly presents the ageless yet unnatural and unreasonable contention that God is known in this Christ Jesus as in no other way, and that Christ cannot be known apart from this particularly inhuman infliction of suffering upon other humans, this *crucifixion*:

Radical evil is now seen in a larger context, and moreover, the new media have brought atrocities to our attention in a way that was impossible before. Is it not possible, therefore, that this neglected aspect of the death of Christ is now for the first time becoming a necessary part of confronting what we now know about the human capacity for radical evil? Had he died in a more merciful, less deliberately dehumanizing way, it would not be possible to see in his death the sum of all horrors (563).

We are also taken to surprising places. Rutledge writes with a keen eye that will not be blurred by what people want to hear, or shy away from that which might make people unhappy or angry. Yet she effortlessly extends the precise word and concept of *diakosyne* and, borrowing from Miroslav Volf, describes the last judgement not in terms of some cataclysmic horror, but as a social event in which God “rights all wrongs” (600). The *apokatastatic* implications are clear, and delightful.

This is a complex book, and no easy read. At times I wondered how any one person could possibly have read so much in a mere lifetime. The extensive treatment of substitutionary atonement did little, I fear, to clear up my own confusion. Yet I am sure that others will find new insights in that area. While many readers will resonate with her strict and unsentimental adherence to the broad spectrum of “orthodoxy,” I fear Rutledge may underestimate how little currency so many find in that

wide and shining path.

Nevertheless, this is a book that should be read, and carefully, especially by those whose first inclination is to disagree with anything like a theology of the cross.

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The Living God and the Fullness of Life

**Jürgen Moltmann. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox,
2015. Pp. 229 + xi.**

Approximately fifty years ago Jürgen Moltmann published his ground-breaking book, *Theology of Hope*, in which he argued that faith in the crucified and risen Christ is a source of hope that sustains life and moves people to constructive action in the world. In the intervening years he has published on numerous theological topics. In this book he returns to the outlook of *Theology of Hope*, but with a broader doctrinal focus and with insights gained from dialogues and experiences he has had over the years. His thesis here is that while it is possible to live without religion, religion makes life livelier. It enables one to live more fully. It sets life in a broader, more hopeful framework, and makes it more joyful.

This book unpacks the thesis in terms of faith in Jesus Christ, moving through chapters on God and eternal life, and then looking at how faith in God should shape life in the present. For Moltmann, the living God is full of life and seeks to impart this fullness to creation as well. God is transcendent to the world and thus a source of radical hope for the future. Yet, as God is living, God is affected by creation and seeks to be in communion with it. Knowledge of God brings a sense of peace and assurance, but also awakens a thirst for life that impels one to seek greater peace and justice for all.

The attributes of God are re-thought here in light of the Jewish experience of God in the Exodus and the Christian experience of God in Jesus Christ. According to Moltmann, Christianity is a religion of joy. The coming of salvation brings joy to people and to God. A God who rejoices is also a God who suffers with God's people and creation, and grieves the loss and destruction of life. For Moltmann the cross of Jesus is central to understanding who God is, and how God is present in the world. But he reminds us that beyond the cross stands Jesus' resurrection, which brings the hope and promise of a new creation in which suffering,

sin, and death are no more. This hope leads one to participate in the life of the world.

This participation gives rise to a spirituality characterized by humility before the grandeur of the cosmos and a love for all God's creation. The recognition that the world is filled with God's presence leads to a cosmic spirituality characterized by reverence for life. The experience of being loved by God awakens in people an answering love of thanksgiving on their part. This giving and receiving of love is at the heart of Moltmann's vision. It originates in the inner-trinitarian life of God and then reaches out through creation and redemption to the world. It is initiated by God and continues in the lives of Christians, amongst themselves, with others, and in relation to the whole creation.

The love of God and the joy it creates give beauty to life and engender protest against suffering. And so long as there is economic exploitation, political oppression, and cultural alienation, liberation theology must remain on the church's agenda. God participates in human freedom through the Holy Spirit, continually awakening movements for liberation, solidarity, reconciliation, and the preservation of creation. This Spirit awakens within human beings a hunger for God, a hunger that ultimately only God can fill. As it is a hunger for the God of life, this hunger is also a passion for justice and peace. As Christian faith sees the love of God revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is a love that is prepared to suffer for the sake of others and the coming of God's reign. Moltmann concludes with a discussion of prayer, which he describes as placing oneself before God. He describes the many modes of prayer—intercession, thanksgiving, lament, petition, and doxology—as layers of self-experience that open up for the person who prays.

This book is beautifully and accessibly written. It is the fruit of a life-time of theological reflection, listening to the world, and intellectual participation in its struggles, sorrows, and joys. It will be useful for clergy, theologians, and educated lay people. It could be used by study groups and for seminary classes. It presents a wonderful encapsulation of what faith in Jesus Christ means today.

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Hopeful Realism in Urban Ministry: Critical Explorations and Constructive Affirmations of Hoping Justice Prayerfully

Barry K. Morris. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016. Pp. 190.

Barry Morris is one of the most dedicated, thoughtful, and experienced persons serving in specialized urban ministry in North America. This book is his testimony to what he has found to be the essential requirements of that ministry. Anyone involved in such a ministry—whether as minister, volunteer supporter, or as someone with supervisory responsibilities—will profit from reading this book. One warning: this is not an easy read. Morris is not a naturally gifted writer, and his publisher has not given him the editorial assistance he needs and deserves. The subtitle alone is a clue to what the reader faces. Having said that, I hasten to add that it is never hard to discern his meaning. One can readily find a reading rhythm that will allow the reader to share in the valuable lessons that the author offers to us. His approach to urban ministry has been deeply informed by wide reading and persistent consultation. This book is his effort to share with us what he has learned.

He gives special attention to three theologians who have informed his ministry: Reinhold Niebuhr, Jürgen Moltmann, and Thomas Merton. Their writings are brought to bear on his three primary themes, which he treats conjunctively: justice, hope, and prayer. It is not easy to treat three such theologians and themes in the brief space of this book, and Morris' efforts to do so sometimes seem jumbled or repetitious. However, the range of sources consulted is prodigious and well-documented. The reader will be encouraged to follow the trail of resources to which the book points, and will find that path worthwhile.

Morris wants us to see, as the title indicates, that urban ministry requires a hopefulness balanced by clear-headed realism. Without hope, the challenges facing such a ministry are simply too formidable and soul-destroying. Without a realistic sense and acceptance of what is possible, such a ministry leads to burn-out, cynicism, and despair. Frequent references to the original, grace-oriented version of Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer" help us appreciate the kind of balance needed. I suspect that we would more fully appreciate the importance of the "Serenity Prayer" in Barry's ministry if he were to share with us its place in his own life, perhaps in the future volume I encourage him to write.

What the book refers to, with good reason, as "urban" ministry was often called "inner-city" ministry in the past. The earlier terminology was changed because of the recognition that both the needs and the

ministry are city-wide. It is ministry involving people who are marginalized in our culture by so-called “race,” by ethnicity, and often by addiction and mental health problems. Such folk are disproportionately involved with the criminal justice system, compounding their marginalization. In all these cases, poverty prevails. Barry is well aware of the challenges presented to such a ministry, and the book refers to them throughout. He attempts to show the resources necessary to prevail in the face of these challenges; “praying justice hopefully” is one of the formulae in which these resources are summarized. He is also clear that alliances and networks of organizations, whether with or without explicit faith orientations, are crucial resources for this ministry. The examples he provides are helpful.

Two of the challenges most regularly referenced are the problem that charity can become a way of avoiding the search for justice, and the challenge to nurture spiritual roots in both ministers and those to whom the ministry is offered. Morris’ elaboration of his themes of justice and prayer, especially in his treatment of Niebuhr and Merton, respectively, are the primary contribution of this volume to meeting these challenges. While I appreciate the value of the sources Morris shares, a more robust attempt to give a narrative account of how these resources have been tested in his own ministry would have strengthened the book.

Finally, scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre have helped us appreciate the clarity that comes from treating human practices such as justice, hope, and prayer as virtues, that is, as the habitual fulfilment of particular human powers. Christians too often have treated these themes as though they were universal and univocal, independent of the context and community in which they are practised. Morris shows some awareness of the contemporary recovery of the virtues as ethical categories, but a more narrative account of urban ministry would enable that awareness to flourish.

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LOONIE: Crazy Talk about Faith and Finances

John VanDuser. Burlington: Wishart.Net, 2014. Pp. 243.

It’s radical. It’s brash. It’s biblical. It’s disturbing. And it’s persuasive.

The material for this galloping monograph on money and faith arose out of a two-month gig that found the author, a licensed lay worship leader,

taking the pulpit at Smithville United Church, near Hamilton, filling-in for a minister away on holidays and at a conference. When approached to take on leadership of eight autumn Sunday services, including sermons, VanDuzer at first was panicked, but then realized that this was an opportunity to explore his own conflicting emotions about faith and finances. He let the worship committee know at the outset that he was going to preach about money for the entirety of the two months, and, despite the misgiving of a few, the committee agreed.

The nine chapters of *Loonie* are the edited result of a collection of sermons, children's stories, and ad-libbed messages, and are "written for the ears rather than the eyes" (x). Style-wise, they are like a collage in which stand-alone sentences, full paragraphs, shaded boxes, lists, and illustrations create an eclectic and stimulating mix. There is ample interpretation of relevant Scripture passages, as well as apt excerpts from sermons and songs, books and movies. Statistical evidence, disturbing news reports, aphorisms, and an ironic joke or two also leaven the text. VanDuzer's harvest of stories, anecdotes, and exhortations is so abundant that many of them have to be stored in a "Loonie Bin" at the end of the main text.

Loonie finds its coherence through the narrative of discovery as VanDuzer presents the results of his exploration of faith and finances, including accounts from his own life. For instance, he shares his own experience of tithing over a quarter-century, beginning when he was just starting his business and relatively poor.

The narrative includes voices characteristic of our times, and there is a resulting punchiness to the text, as when we hear:

A girl at the back of the classroom puts up her hand. "Um, excuse me, Professor Know-It-All, if I'm so rich then why don't I feel rich? If I'm so rich, why do I feel so . . . so . . . so, umm poor."

"Does anybody really neeeeeeeed the next generation smart phone? Really?!"

His allusions are colourful and frequently provocative:

"The VERY FIRST THING Scrooge did when he became a changed man . . . he started giving—no, he started throwing—away money, the money which until the day before he'd held in such a miserly grip."

"No, we can't take it with us but Jesus says we can do even better by

sending it on ahead when he tells us to store up our treasures in Heaven!"

Loonie's theme is that we'll always feel poor if we persist in looking for something more without making a change that puts God first. The rich especially (and we're virtually all rich in Canada) must learn that the more we have the less we're satisfied. He asks us to pay attention to what is at stake in our handling of possessions and especially money:

No, it's not about money, it's about your heart and the incalculable value of your soul. To be clear, we've been talking all this time not about money, but about a priceless relationship that's possible only with and through God; a relationship that far too many of us have taken for granted and have devalued to the point of worthlessness (125).

This is a stimulating book, provocative and to the point as it is. Any Christian could find challenge and encouragement in its pages. I have a hunch that a stewardship committee, daring to undertake a study series, might find it a breath of fresh and bracing air.

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Do You Want to Write for *Touchstone*?

Touchstone welcomes submissions from new authors. Articles should be approximately 3000 words in length, and should be submitted at least three months before the publication date of a given theme. While the articles for the remaining numbers in 2017 are fully assigned, the three themes for 2018 are: Aesthetics, Providence and Prayer, and the Legacy of the Evangelical United Brethren.

A profile of important United Church figures, or of figures influencing United Church people and ministries, is included in each number. Profiles also are approximately 3000 words in length. The profile editor is Prof. Sandra Beardsall, who can be contacted at sandra.beardsall@usask.ca. Each number also contains book reviews, normally no more than 750 words each. The book review editor is Prof. Donald Schweitzer, who can be contacted at don.schweitzer@usask.ca.

Touchstone uses the Chicago Manual Style, Canadian spelling, and footnotes. A summary style sheet is available on the *Touchstone* website, www.touchstonecanada.ca or from the editor.

Please let the appropriate editor know that you are interested in writing an article, profile, or review.