Touchstone

Faith and Technology

Reviews

Editorial

While not usually known for being early adopters, with the exception of those tribes that define themselves by their separation from society and culture, churches have always made use of technological innovations to proclaim the Gospel. Where would we have been in March, 2020 if the ability to gather and communicate remotely was not available? Email, the internet and readily available sound and video that don't require an expert to operate have been incorporated into the everyday life of the church. For the most part, we'd have to agree that it has made our lives easier.

But technology is not just gadgets, it's also a mindset. Our cover designer, Michelle Robinson, asked AI to create an illustration for our theme, "Faith and Technology." AI mines the almost infinite quantity of data available in the online world and turns it into what it thinks the user is looking for. It's interesting to see not only the generative capabilities of AI, but the underlying assumptions about what "church" means and how it interfaces with technological change. AI clearly operates with some ecclesiastical stereotypes.

The theme itself was chosen to mark the seventieth anniversary of the publication of *Le Technique ou, L'Enjou du Siècle* by French sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul. It is also the sixtieth anniversary of the English edition, published under the title *The Technological Society,* and the thirtieth anniversary of Ellul's death in 1994, Ellul sounded the alarm about the growing dominance of "technique," which he defined as "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency . . . for every field of human activity."[1] What we think of as "technology" —computers, robots, AI—are the tools for the implementation of a relentlessly hegemonic cultural mindset with implications for the entire world. Technique, Ellul argued, faces the human race with profound and perplexing social, ethical, spiritual and theological challenges.

The articles in this issue explore technology and technique from a variety of perspectives. Matthew Prior offers an excellent and accessible overview of Ellul's work and the implications of his thought for theology and the Church. He analyzes Matthew Ellul's concept of technique primarily through the biblical category of idolatry.

Tom Bandy argues that sophisticated data analysis can be a powerful tool for mission and evangelism. Churches can now access highly refined and nuanced information about the "diverse publics"

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[1] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society,* (1954) (New York: Basic Books, 1964), xxv.

living in their communities. With this knowledge, Bandy suggests, churches can more effectively communicate the Gospel to people in ways that connect with the reality of their lives and lifestyles.

Beth Hayward looks at that rapidly emerging technology that everyone is talking about, generative Artificial Intelligence. Beth looks at both the promise and the peril of AI. She argues that "Theologians dismiss conversations about AI at our peril. As experts in the field of *meaning making*, we have a responsibility to bring expertise to bear on a technology that is shaping every aspect of our human life."

In my article, I reflect on mainline Christianity's sixty-year quest to find technical solutions to the adaptive challenge of church decline. I argue for a "low-tech ecclesiology," shifting our focus away from anxiously striving to maintain an institutional model of church prevalent in the 20th century, and re-engaging with more ancient visions of the church centred on proclamation the Gospel in word and deed, entrusting the future of the church to God.

From the "one-of-these-things-is-not-like-the-others" department, Mac Watts writes about "marginalized Mary." Mac, long-time Professor of Theology at the University of Winnipeg, is the founding editor of *Touchstone* (and the external reader for my doctoral thesis.) He traces the liberal Protestant neglect of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, and makes an intriguing case for restoring her to a position of importance in Protestant theology, spirituality and devotion. While at first not seeming to have much to do with technology and faith, Mac offers, not a technique for church relevance and growth, but a call to draw more deeply and fully on the life of Jesus as witnessed in the New Testament (not hypothetically reconstructed by modern historical and criticism.) Such a witness is truncated and incomplete without an emphasis on Mary.

In "From the Heart," Rob Fennell tells us what he has "learned from walking." He gives us a lovely account of the spiritual practice of pilgrimage, drawing both on Christian tradition and his own experience as an avid walker.

Betsy Anderson has written an excellent profile of trail-blazing historian, biographer, professor and leader in the Student Christian Movement, Marg Prang. I love the Profile section of *Touchstone* because it introduces us to so many extraordinary women and men we might not have heard of who have had an impact on the United Church.

Three book reviews round out this issue of *Touchstone.*

As always, I am so grateful to the wonderful team of behind the scenes folks who make *Touchstone* happen, entirely as a labour of love—our Board, Profile Editor Sandra, Book Review Editor Lori, Rachel our

copy editor, Jerome our formatter, Kate our Subscription Manager, Judi, our Treasurer, Aaron our webmaster—but especially you, our subscribers and readers. Our readership has grown in the last three years. You can help *Touchstone* continue to be a forum for theological conversation in the United Church and beyond by renewing your subscription, giving a gift subscription or making a tax deductible donation. You can do all of this and more on our new and improved website *www.touchstonejournal.ca*.

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JACQUES ELLUL AND GENERATIVE AI: A DIALECTICAL ENGAGEMENT
by Matthew T. Prior

Introduction

Most Christian institutions have seen the importance over the past 15 years (if not longer) of responding creatively to digital technology. Sometimes those responses have been predominantly instrumental, harnessing the potential of "persuasive technologies" for our existing understandings of Christian mission, e.g., in the production of Bible apps such as YouVersion, in the offering of online Christian worship and community (now mainstream post-pandemic)[1] and in the development of Christian interfaces with smart speakers such as Alexa.[2] Sometimes they have been more deeply theological. The most basic theological question to ask is this: "What has technology got to do with God"? Moreover, following on there are also urgent questions to ask about the degree to which our understandings of mission, and indeed of God, have become increasingly instrumentalised in a technological world. In other words, in such a context, are we increasingly tempted to turn God into a means to our ends, a rapid and effective delivering-system for meeting our needs?

The rapid advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) that we have seen over the past decade, and particularly over the past 18 months with the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, have created a significant moment of transition from what one ethically-minded technology industry expert Tristan Harris calls curative AI to newer forms of creative AI, more widely known as generative AI.[3] Many books and journals have responded to these developments, including *Touchstone*. What new contribution of value then can be brought to this conversation by the writings of the late French Christian academic and technology critic, Jacques Ellul? His death thirty years ago in 1994 and the publication of his seminal text *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* seventy years ago in 1954[4] make this a

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[1] See my reflection on this in "Prophets of Zoom? Jacques Ellul, Sherry Turkle, Simone Weil and Online Communities," *The Ellul Forum*, 71 (Spring 2023): 25-45.

[2] See "Our Smart Speaker Apps," accessed 19 April 2024, *https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/our-smart-speaker-apps.*

[3] Tristan Harris "Beyond the AI dilemma" filmed at CogX Festival, 21 September 2023, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5dQ5zEuE9Q*.

[4] The English translation *The Technological Society* was published in 1964, although a better translation of the French title would be *Technique or What is at Stake this Century.*

suitable moment to reflect on his legacy and his ongoing influence on those, whether academics or not, whether Christians or not, who wish to grapple with the technological environment in which we live and move and have our being in much of the world today.

In this essay I will argue that Ellul's method of engaging with complex sociological realities in the light of Scripture is his enduring legacy to the theology of technology. I will also highlight two areas where we might extend his ethical critique: the need for us to reclaim our agency and to retrain our attention in a world of generative AI. But first, let me briefly introduce Ellul to those who are less familiar with his life and work.

Who was Ellul?

Jacques Ellul lived most of his life in Bordeaux, in southwest France. Ellul grew up in relative obscurity but was academically able and established himself as a professional historian and sociologist, teaching for many years at the University of Bordeaux (where he held a chair in the Institute for Political Studies and where he is still honoured today). His fine-grained attention to how institutions develop led him to turn a sharp and forensic eye to the development of technology as an institution and as an all-pervasive milieu and inescapable mindset in the modern world. This is how I would render his use of the term *Technique* and it is important to note that for Ellul *Technique* plays the central role in his thought that *Capital* plays in the thought of Karl Marx, whose work Ellul knew inside out.

Yet this sparse description misses out what first drew me to Ellul, which was his ardent desire to engage social realities from the perspective of Christian faith and theology. He describes in a number of places how he came to a living faith in Jesus at the age of twenty through a sudden conversion. Finding a home within the Reformed Church of France, the heirs of the Huguenots, unsurprisingly John Calvin was an early influence upon him, but he was quickly supplanted by Ellul's twin theological mentors, Karl Barth, and above all Søren Kierkegaard. Ellul was, though, no armchair Christian scholar. As David Gill, the leading Anglophone authority on Ellul, puts it, "For more than forty years, Ellul served not just the university as a distinguished professor but also the church, not just on various committees and commissions but in the local parishes, among the people, as a teacher, preacher, worship leader, and pastor/mentor." [5]

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[5] As Gill notes, though a lay theologian, Ellul was a well-educated Christian scholar, having almost completed the Strasbourg faculty seminary curriculum (his studies were disrupted by the German Occupation). See David Gill, "Jacques Ellul and Technology's Trade-off," *Comment*, 1 March 2012,

Despite this very full and courageous life,[6] Ellul's academic output was anything but haphazard or dilettante. With a clear project in mind, he embarked on a basically Kierkegaardian project of writing two sets of books, with an ongoing dialectic or dialogue between them: on the one hand sociological works focussed on analysing contemporary society, around the centrepiece of Technique, and on the other, works devoted to locating Technique within a biblical theological framework.[7] As he himself pointed out, it is impossible to understand *The Technological Society* without understanding his theological response to Technique, *The Meaning of the City* (drafted initially in the 1940s and 50s, but published, perhaps strangely in English first in 1970, only later published in French in 1975!). As that title suggests, the closest analogy to Technique Ellul could find in the Bible was the figure of the city, by which he means the phenomenon of human civilisation as it is recounted across the narrative of the canonical texts.

Technique and technology

Ellul uses Technique as shorthand for a mindset, summing up in one word the underlying spirit incarnated in the proliferation of tools, machines, devices and basically "means to an end" he saw developing around him in the aftermath of the Second World War.[8] Ellulian Technique denotes our obsession with the best means to use to gain greater power, control, efficiency, speed and integration across all areas of life. Ellul barely spoke English but in *La Technique* he famously defined Technique by the English phrase "the one best way," coined by the inventor of production-line manufacture, Frederick Taylor.[9] An analogy I use in my teaching is that

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https://comment.org/jacques-ellul-and-technologys-trade-off/.

[6] Ellul volunteered in the French resistance during the Second World War and was eventually honoured in 2001 as "Righteous among the Nations" at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem for helping Jewish families to escape.

[7] I outline this in my book *Confronting Technology: The Theology of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020), following French Ellul scholar Frédéric Rognon.

[8] In this respect his treatment of it is not too different from Martin Heidegger's famous essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, published also in 1954.

[9] He offers in his preface this famous definition: "The term Technique, as I use it, does not mean machines . . . or this or that procedure for attaining an end. In our technological society, technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency . . . in every field of human activity." Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. Trans. John Wilkinson. New York: Knopf, (1964), xxv.

Ellulian Technique is like the intellectual "software" that makes the modern world possible—we become more and more obsessed with predicting and controlling the future, with linear logic: if we do A, B will result, and B will be the best thing.

We increasingly struggle if we don't know what's going to happen or if we feel we can't control an outcome or if we're missing out on the best way to do something.[10] Behind all this above all, if we follow Ellul's logic, the ultimate aim of Technique is the search for autonomy—for a way of making the "best" decisions that is increasingly automated, and that pushes the persistent uncertainties of human decision-making increasingly to the margins. It is for this reason that one of the most significant sociological problems Ellul observes with Technique is the diminishment of human capacities, and most especially the loss of human freedom and agency in the face of "the best way to do things." We tend to be beholden to our search for technical autonomy: in Ellul's own more theological language in other texts, Technique has become the new "sacred."

Ellul's theology of technology

I will return to this theme of human agency in a moment but let me first outline what Ellul means by the sacred and its relevance to this discussion. By calling it sacred Ellul means that Technique is the organising principle of technological societies. As I reflected in my book on Ellul, *Confronting Technology*, for Ellul, the sacred organises place and time, giving meaning and orientation in a world experienced as threatening and disordered. What this means is that when faced with a threat, such as poverty, disease, crime, climate change or conflict, we have tended to trust that technologies will reliably come to the rescue, even when the very problems that threaten us may have been to some degree created by modern technologies. When problems stubbornly persist or worsen (as is the case with climate change) or when tragic and unexpected events overwhelm us (as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic), we often cannot believe this situation has been allowed to happen (to us) and these problems have not been dealt with (yet). To caricature in the words of the provocative title of Morozov's book on digital technologies, we approach problems with a mindset of *To Save Everything, Click Here*.[11]

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[10] For more on this theme, see Paul Scherz, *Tomorrow's Troubles: Risk, Uncertainty and Prudence in an Age of Algorithmic Governance* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2022).

[11] Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solutionism, and the Urge to Fix Problems that Don't Exist* (Allen Lane, 2013).

Although, as I will explore below, I certainly do not entirely endorse Ellul's technology criticism, surely the way he intuits our desire to give an autonomy, almost an independent agency to Technique is insightful, not to say prophetic. And this brings me to Ellul's theological engagement with Technique and the sacred, which is to read it through the lens of the Hebrew Bible's recurrent critiques of idolatry. Ellul has little time for the idea that human beings are co-creators with God, an idea that he believes came into currency in a scientific age to justify human power. Ellul thinks co-creation is both naïve and unbiblical, arguing that we must never forget that we are creatures first and foremost and there is an infinite difference between our creativity and God's creativity.[12]

The things we make can never express or capture the divine, for Ellul. The problem of idolatry is twofold: we reduce God to a visible form, but we also give away our own agency to what we have made. The one who creates idols always ends up ceding their own power as well as projecting quasi-divine power onto the idol. God however is "wholly other" to us and cannot be captured in this way. This for Ellul is the meaning of holiness, which means that the visible sacred is for him the opposite of the invisible holy. This logic for Ellul explains why God reveals Godself through the fleeting, uncontrollable means of the spoken word, not the capturable and repeatable image. The revelation of God in an image takes one form, one alone, and that is in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the true human being. What is pertinent here is that Ellul's critique of Technique, as of everything else, is completely theological, if not to say christological. Ellul's sociology sometimes lets this slip, though more often it keeps to its restricted domain.[13]

Perhaps surprisingly, the biblical book that Ellul makes central to his theology of technology is *The Book of Revelation*, to which he devoted an unconventional but fascinating commentary.[14] The drama of the book is God coming to us in Jesus Christ, reflected at the heart of the book with the birth of a child in chapter 12. Famously, in the later chapters, the great city of Babylon, symbolising human civilisation, is destroyed and yet that

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[12] The key biblical text for Ellul is the myth of Cain and Abel, which he sees as a figural text on the meaning of civilisation. He famously argued that co-creation is the theology of Cain!

[13] A French text in which Ellul's theological underpinning becomes explicit has just been released in English translation, *Theology and Technique: Toward an Ethic of Non-Power.* Trans. Christian Roy (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2024).

[14] Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1977).

does not mean that there is nothing of value in or retrievable from history at the end. The Book of Revelation ends with the glories of all the nations being brought into the new creation as a tribute and offering of worship to God (e.g., Rev 21:24, 26). There is both a kind of humility and a beauty about that. Human works are ultimately to be sifted by God to see if they are worthy of the new creation. And yet there is also a glory in it because this image gives us the hope that human works, even technological works, can have a place in God's future, as Ellul explicitly states on a number of occasions.

As a corollary of this theology, Ellul argues that Judeo-Christian revelation demands an incessant *desacralisation* of the world, a refusal to cede our trust in God to what we can manipulate and control. The Christian's task as regards technology is to desacralize it, to stop it becoming the organising principle of our lives, an extremely demanding task in a world organised around technology. However, Ellul himself argued that desacralizing did not mean destroying it or refusing to use it or even denying it would be part of the eschatological future. At its simplest, desacralizing means we need to reduce Technique to the status of a profane means to a human-centred end, an end that we have properly deliberated over. As David Gill puts it, we need to be ready to laugh at attempts to take technology too seriously and refuse to take for granted the dominant, technological values of our age, such as unlimited growth, measurement and productivity.[15] In short, what can be done does not have to be done. As the British ethicist Luke Bretherton puts it in a recent discussion of technology and the future of work: "rather than view technological development as inevitable, it would better be situated within and subordinated to democratic debate about what kind of human future was sought and hence what technologies were needed to enable such a future."[16]

Ellul's legacy in a world of Generative AI
In the attempt to extrapolate from Ellul's work to 2024, it is important, in my view, to express our debts to him while noting some significant

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[15] Gill's article "Jacques Ellul and Technology's Trade-off" is sub-headed "When did 'hard-working, successful, creative' become our virtues of choice"?

[16] Luke Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2023), 290-91. So, for example, it is more efficient at one level in terms of time and money to automate certain tasks and to release your employees (either to do other tasks for the company, or to seek alternative employment!) But is that the best outcome for human flourishing, if we bring to bear a wider frame of reference?

problems. In my view, Ellul does not say nearly enough about human creativity and technology. I now tend to start by saying that the very possibility for technology is rooted in the intricate structuring of God's good creation, the amazing potential that is latent there. And as recent Catholic social teaching maintains, while we are certainly not co-creators, our human vocation is realised in relation to discovering that potential.[17]

Of course, with Ellul, we recognise that the technologies in our hands are not simply a divine gift dropping from heaven or a pure work of human goodness but are as fallen and as human as we are, except on a vast organised scale. But this recognition leads us to ask what it would take for us to desacralize any given technology, to make it a means to God's ends, a "conduit of love" as one theological writer on technology puts it.[18] In short, how can this particular technology work with the grain of new creation? How can it help to realise the kingdom of God?[19] I wish Ellul had said more about this, though he does have some examples of hope in his writings, and it is reported that he was much less combative in conversation than he could often be in writing.[20]

By way of conclusion, I'd like to suggest two key areas where Ellul still has a contribution to make to the burgeoning discussion about AI, the first concerned with human agency and the second concerned with patterns of attention.

Reclaiming our agency

Often we speak of AI as a dread threat to human uniqueness, often dramatized in science fiction stories of robots taking over from us or figured in the writings of the more radical technical utopians on the near prospect of a superintelligence. Generative AI has brought some of these narratives to the fore.[21] However, I am persuaded by the case made by

[17] For this account of technology, see Benedict XVI. "Caritas in Veritate." Encyclical Letter, June 29, 2009, chapter 6. Online. *http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.*

[18] Brian Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 235.

[19] For more on this, see Michael S. Burdett, *Eschatology and the Technological Future*. Routledge Studies in Religion 43 (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[20] Ellul himself even wrote a hopeful book *Changer de Révolution* (untranslated) about how the nascent information revolution of the late 1970s might lead to different patterns of working and resting, if a Christian vision of human flourishing were to guide it.

[21] Eve Poole, *Robot Souls: Programming in Humanity* (London: CRC, 2024),

British ethicist Robert Song that theological attempts to defend human uniqueness are vulnerable to a "human-of-the-gaps" mindset whereby we seek to locate our dignity in what AI *cannot* yet do. Far more important is to see how human beings are *already* routinely treated in AI systems as brute matter for manipulation or valuable data sources. As Song puts it, "it is not human uniqueness that we should be worried about, our concern should be for human dignity. We should not fear the upgrading of robots as much as the downgrading of human beings."[22]

We need to challenge a vision of human beings as basically machines following predictable laws, liable for reprogramming, given the right stimuli, without our explicit knowledge or consent. We know already the extent to which we are being tracked, profiled and nudged in surveillance capitalism.[23] The Catholic ethicist Paul Scherz insightfully sees this as the triumph of a behaviourist approach to human beings and offers a virtue ethics response to challenge an excessively cynical view of human beings written into many systems of automated decision-making.[24] We need to be realistic about our chances of success, and yet our task as Christians is to anticipate God's judging activity in the world.[25] Not all technologies are not worthy of the kingdom of God. To put it crudely, smart systems should not treat human beings as unintelligent, overwhelming our agency. Very briefly, we might note two practical proposals, one aimed at designers, the other at users.

First, we should be able to trace human accountability even in machine-learning systems. As one senior programmer put it at a recent conference I attended, the principle of Occam's razor can serve well: the

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chapter 3 passim.

[22] Robert Song, "Robots, AI and human uniqueness: learning what not to fear," in *The Robot Will See You Now: Artificial Intelligence and the Christian Faith,* eds. John Wyatt and Stephen Williams (London: SPCK, 2021), 113. Song argues more broadly that AI poses a challenge to a reductive materialism, not human vocation.

[23] Stephen Williams and Nathan Mladin, "The question of surveillance capitalism," reflecting on Shoshana Zuboff's book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* in Wyatt and Williams, eds. *The Robot*.

[24] Paul Scherz, *Tomorrow's Troubles.* See Matthew Prior, "Book Review: Tomorrow's Troubles," Studies in Christian Ethics 37, no.2, (Spring 2024), 195-97, *https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/09539468231216898r*.

[25] In his chapter on anthropology in *The Robot*, Williams reflects, 'AI, like everything else, must face the test of Christology' (eds. Wyatt and Williams, 105). Whatever else we can say, the logos became frail flesh, not a device, text or code.

simplest and most elegant way of programming is the most explicable to a regulator. We need to listen to and support theologically minded technologists who are working in this area to produce resources for practitioners. Derek Schuurman is a notable writer in this field.[26]

Secondly, systems should be designed to complement or amplify the agency of the human users, rather than to replace it. Schuurman suggests that the very idea of artificial intelligence may hinder us in this task, since we would better speak of human Intelligence Amplification or IA.[27] We live now with constant access to vast stores of "crystallised intelligence," that is huge swathes of data and information retrievable and reconfigurable within seconds. In such a context, we need to ensure our engagement with technologies such as ChatGPT builds up our "fluid intelligence," our ability to "abstract from what we know in order to generate fresh insights and novel ideas."[28] Put simply, how can we ensure that these systems do genuinely assist us to think and write for ourselves, rather than thinking and writing for us?[29] If and as we become users of generative AI, we need consciously to build up new critical faculties.

Ellul spoke proleptically about this kind of engagement with information technology in what is, in my estimation, his best book, his 1981 text *La parole humiliée* (published in English translation as *The Humiliation of the Word* in 1985). In his criticism of an omnipresent mathematical rationality, Ellul berates us for believing something just because a computer generates it: "The computer can never be the ultimate reason."[30]

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[26] This is far beyond my technical expertise, but I gather that data annotation is a key part of this accountability (see Ethan J. Brue, Derek C. Schuurman and Steven H. VanderLeest. *A Christian Field Guide to Technology for Engineers and Designers* (IVP Academic: 2022). We can perhaps take heart too from movements within the wider technology industry such as Tristan Harris' Centre for Humane Technology, seeking to place AI within a wider framework of human flourishing.

[27] Derek Schuurman, 'ChatGPT and the Rise of AI', Christians Scholars' Review, 20 January 2023, *https://christianscholars.com/chatgpt-and-the-rise-of-ai/.*

[28] Poole, *Robot Souls*, 141 (summarising Raymond Cattell's theory of crystallised and fluid intelligence). Poole's book is a brilliantly creative recent theological engagement with AI.

[29] Poole explores the epistemological discussion of "qualia" in connection with ChatGPT, exploring the subjective experience of experiencing or knowing something over against knowledge as a simple output (Poole, *Robot Souls*, 44-47).

[30] Prior, *Confronting Technology*, 206, citing the French text in translation.

Retraining our patterns of attention.

We can and should be able to design digital devices not to disturb us all the time. The current default is "notify" us, that is, interrupt our attention to retrain it on something new—often something marketable. No doubt this has some safety applications and some benefits for us as consumers, and yet it also has some significant downsides.

Attention is morally and theologically significant. This is again something that Ellul has a clear sense of throughout his theological writings. Human beings are made in the image of a speaking God in order to respond to God. In *The Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul makes the sustained contrast, alluded to earlier, between the word and the image in Scripture. In the phenomenological opening chapter of this book, Ellul argues that the spoken word is the essential medium of non-power—non-coercive, ambiguous and connotative, a living presence, requiring two persons in relationship in time: "The spoken word is essentially presence. It is a living thing. Never an object."[31]

The kind of open, patient attention that relationships of physical presence require differs from the interruptible and instrumental, means-to-an-end kind of attention that our devices often force upon us, whether we like it or not. To accompany Ellul's account, I have found helpful a celebrated theological account of attention in the work of the French Catholic philosopher, Simone Weil. Weil argues that, at its root, all attention is about our ability to wait on God. This means for her, the act of close attention, paradigmatically for her in study, can help us to wait on God and wait on another person. As she beautifully put it, "Whoever goes through years of study without developing this attention within himself has lost a great treasure. Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbour, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance."[32] In short, anything that overwhelms and rewires our patterns of attention is changing our relationship to God and neighbour in potentially harmful ways.

To retrain our attention, we might pursue activities that frame a more holistic attention to the world, sometimes called "focal activities," such as working with our hands, learning a traditional craft, growing food or walking in the natural world. We could add disciplines such as technological silence and Sabbath, solitude and gathered in-person

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[31] Prior, *Confronting Technology*, 240.

[32] Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of Studies" in *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge, 1951), 114. Chapter found online at *https://www.themathesontrust.org/papers/christianity/Weil-Reflections.pdf*.

worship. These habits are inevitably part of our moral re-formation, but this should not imply a total rejection of digital technology. In fact, maintaining a holistic attention to the world can ensure that when we do come to the scientific and technical task as programmers or users, the kind of attention we bear to it can also express our love of God and neighbour.[33]

In the final analysis, what I retain most from Ellul is his method rather than his entire view of Technique. He had a robust confidence that the Bible itself is the original critical theory, offering a powerful critique of the delusions of human culture, but also confident that God always wants to break in and shake us from our delusions. Without question, many of his insights need re-interpreting for today but his principled dialogue between the Bible and technological culture is in my view his enduring contribution.

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[33] For an allusion to the vocation of science as a form of love for God serving to refine Christians' attention to creation, see Samuel Wells, *Humbler Faith, Bigger God: Finding a Story to Live By* (Canterbury Press: Norwich, 2022), 195.

THE MISSIONAL VALUE OF LIFESTYLE RESEARCH
by Thomas G. Bandy

In the contemporary world of speed, flux, and blur, lifestyle change is faster than demographic change. The ability to track the "digital footprints" of individuals or households means that a record of our daily choices can be updated constantly, sorted into clusters, and used to anticipate our needs and preferences by both for-profit and non-profit organizations in all sectors (corporate and retail, health care and social service, communication and technology, media of all kinds, politics, etc.).

In the past, demographic research tended to create "pigeonholes" in which to slot people into very general and relatively static categories. But assumptions about age, gender, race and ethnicity, language, occupation, education, family structure, housing and more could not keep pace with the speed of change and the explosion of diversity. Church leaders, for example, have discovered that program assumptions based on demographic research alone cannot help them shape effective ministries for "radical" hospitality, "contemporary" worship, "authentic" relationships, "successful" outreach, "empowered" volunteerism, "effective" in-person and on-line communication, and "relevant" technology upgrades or facility renovations.

Lifestyle Research

Lifestyle research is replacing pure demographic research as the primary tool organizations use in strategic thinking. This is because lifestyle research helps us discern "flyways" through which people pursue their potential rather than "pigeonholes" in which people can be labeled. Sophisticated search engines can create and constantly update color-coded maps with which we can literally see how diverse publics are migrating between rural regions to central towns, between cities and suburbs, and between one neighbourhood to another.

Lifestyle research tracks the "digital footprint" every person leaves whenever they show up on the grid (i.e. swipe a credit card, buy a car, take a holiday, enroll in a program, sign a form, use social media, and on and on). Digital footprints are associated with residential locations. Data is gathered in vast quantities. Algorithms sort the data into clusters. Clusters are refined into segments that describe the daily habits, tastes, preferences, and priorities of distinct groups of people. Clustered groups resemble a "family tree" with which we can assess the relative influence individual lifestyle segments have with each other. Segments and groups can be mapped, geographically located by population density, and colour

coded to visually reveal the diversity of any neighbourhood, city, or region.

Several companies (*Experian, Claritas*, etc.) create lifestyle portraits to aid strategic thinking. *Experian* currently describes about 71 lifestyle segments, organized in 19 lifestyle groups, in the United States. The number and descriptions of lifestyle segments and groups varies, of course, from country to country. When I worked for The United Church of Canada, we used a version of *Prizm* from *Environics Analytics*. At the time, they identified 66 clusters in 69 social groups.

- Business and communication sectors use it to customize advertising in social media for an individual user, and market goods and technologies with pinpoint accuracy. This is why the supermarket on one side of the city stocks different products, in different quantities, than the supermarket of the same grocery chain, but on the other side of town, stocks other products in other quantities.
- Health care and emergency services use it to anticipate changing priorities in the community. This is why hospitals choose to develop a specific clinic or specialize in a specific procedure. There is a reason why police, paramedic, fire, and other emergency services are located and equipped in specific places, and train personnel in certain practices.
- Social services use it to customize programs for social diversity, target fund raising for different philanthropies, and train volunteers to better empathize with the micro-cultures in the community. This is why micro-charities are attracting more attention than largely bureaucratic institutions in giving and personal service.
- Public school systems and universities use it to build or close properties, upgrade technologies, plan bus routes, schedule and customize classes and curricula, prioritize different educational methods, and equip teachers to better understand the greater diversity of needs in the classroom. There is a reason why schools and universities specialize in different programs relevant to changing needs.

The power of lifestyle research lies in the highly nuanced clustering of households by tracking patterns of behaviour which takes us well beyond generalized categories for urban, suburban, or rural contexts. Organizational planners can see the complexity of relative lifestyle representation in any geographical area. And since this data is continually updated, it reveals the *flow* of publics from one place to another (be it a

different neighbourhood, city, province, or state) which can help planners anticipate needs and expectations several years in the future.

Lifestyle segments and groups are not just abstractions. They are like portraits. Some search engines create paradigmatic images creating a visual depiction of the culture in which a segment of the public thrives. I think these images are best understood as part of a motion picture. Researchers see the movement of publics in time and space. We can see what a specific group of people was like, is like, and is likely to become: what they look like, how they are likely to behave, and who they want to be with . . . and anticipate what they might need to sustain or enhance their lives. These are not *certainties*. They are *probabilities.* In modern times, when the speed of change makes traditional strategic planning obsolete, this is the best hope for strategic thinking.

Lifestyle Research and Ministry[1]
Churches use lifestyle research as an integral part of what is commonly called *community exegesis.* Just as we use analytical tools to study the Bible to discern how the Holy Spirit is speaking to us today, so also, we use tools to study our community to see how the Holy Spirit is moving among us today. And we can customize our programs and position our people however, and wherever Christ is moving along city streets and country byways.

Community exegesis is like looking through the progressive lenses on a microscope. The biggest, broadest, and most static view is pure demographics generated by a national census and supplemented by agency or corporate research into each demographic category. A second, closer view of society might be gained by piecing together surveys gathering opinions about religion and religious practices, but these often rely on traditional Christendom terminologies that fail to interpret more complex spiritualities that permeate diverse cultures.

The closest, sharpest, most dynamic view is lifestyle research. Denominations and congregations use it to initiate, redevelop, merge, or

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[1] I have published five books on using demographic and lifestyle research for church strategic thinking.. See Thomas G. Bandy, *See Know and Serve the People within Your Reach* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013)*; Worship Ways for the People within Your Reach* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014) *;Spiritual Leadership: Why Leaders Lead and Who Seekers Follow* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016) *;Strategic Thinking: How to Sustain effective Ministries* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017) *; Sideline Church: Bridging the Chasm between Churches and Cultures* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018.).

close facilities. They use it to adapt relevant ministries, design communication strategies, broaden financial support, connect with new publics, anticipate stress and build reconciliation between disparate groups.

> *We can understand why leaders lead and who seekers seek.* We can not only train relevant skills, but we can evaluate and build the credibility of leaders among distinct publics in the community. Bishops can appoint clergy, and churches can call ministers, for the needs of the community and not just the expectations of the church membership.

> *Pastors, preachers, and staff can sharpen the Gospel message for any given time, situation, or public.* We can not only share Good News for the world but share the *Best News* that is especially relevant and redemptive for any given household, neighborhood, town, or city.

> *We can create relational maps of a community.* We can be proactive about reconciliation and build bridges of understanding between groups who may be indifferent to, competitive with, or even combative toward each other.

The search engine that many Protestant and Catholic denominations and churches in the US use is *www.MissionInsite.com*. Many denominations subscribe on behalf of their congregations, so that both regional and local bodies can explore community dynamics. I contribute to the website, and routinely use it for regional and congregational church planning and leadership coaching.

I created commentaries for all 71 lifestyle segments and lifestyle groups defined by *Experian* specifically related to diverse expectations for church programs and church leadership. These help church leaders build empathy with people unlike themselves, interpret the most likely ministry expectations for different lifestyle groups, and innovate creative ways to serve the community.

The Christian movement today no longer operates in a "one-size fits all" world. We must adapt, customize, focus, train and redeploy. Churches can set aside Christendom habits, look beyond membership entitlements, and think outside the box to bless strangers to grace. Lifestyle research is important for every ministry of the church.

(1) Shape the design and sharpen the point of the "Sunday Morning Experience" of hospitality, worship, and Christian education:

✓   *Customize radical hospitality to deepen relationships and motivate discipleship*. Some lifestyle segments prefer the minimal basics in greeting, seating, food, and technology. Others expect multiple choices with more intentional friendship, comfortable seating, food choices, and contemporary technologies. Others expect very culturally sensitive greets, healthy food choices, customized environments. Still others come late and leave early, looking for "take out" and connecting later via instant messaging.

✓   *Focus missional goals for worship*. I define seven kinds of missionally motivated worship. Some lifestyle segments prefer more "traditional" worship (educational, inspirational, and caregiving); other seek more "organic" or practical worship (transformational, coaching, and healing); and still others more interactive worship directly related to social service.

✓   *Diversify content, method, and resources for Christian education*. Some lifestyle groups prefer to gather in groups by generation and others with cross-generational peers; some prefer Bible-based resource while others prefer topical resources; some prefer printed curricula and some more experiential multi-media.

(2) Mature the membership, focus outreach, and equip volunteers for effective service and empathic witness.

✓   *Multiply the affinities and practices of small group ministries*. Some lifestyle segments prefer alternate leadership, and some prefer consistent and trained leaders. Some prefer to study a book or other curricula, while others gather around a common need, interest, or enthusiasm.

✓   *Discern outreach priorities both to receive and share mission.* Outreach today often focuses on very specific needs and offers hands-on volunteer opportunities. But lifestyle preferences can be organized into several broad categories: survival, addiction intervention, health and wellness, human potential, human destiny, interpersonal relationships, and improving quality of life.

(3) Manage resources, renovate facilities, upgrade technologies, and multiply communication methods:

✓   *Upgrade facilities, technologies, and symbols*. Lifestyle preferences often are selective about ecclesiastical or utilitarian facilities, modern or postmodern technologies, and symbols from Christendom or from diverse spiritualities.

✓   *Encourage generosity and customize stewardship as a lifestyle*. Some lifestyle segments prefer to give to unified budgets, while others prefer to designate their giving. Some seek information about

charitable giving while others seek personal coaching to shape household budgets around Christian core values.

✓   *Communicate effectively (physically and digitally) with different groups of people.* The preferences lifestyle groups apply to their daily living are not necessarily the same for church participation. Different groups rely on regular mail, visits and verbal announcements, and/or radio, while others rely on email, instant messaging, and/or streaming video.

A search engine like *Missioninsite.com* allows churches to upload membership lists into the GPS system. Leaders can then compare lifestyle representation in the membership with lifestyle representation in the community. They can evaluate the relative success of their ministries, adjust programs and retrain volunteers to keep pace with community change, and anticipate the stress church members may experience as leaders adapt programs and reprioritize budgets.

A healthy church in the 21st century tries to mirror community diversity in membership diversity. Lifestyle research generates greater empathy between the homogeneity of many churches and the growing heterogeneity of most communities. Church members can build a rapport with people unlike themselves. Whether they agree or disagree on public policies and religious doctrines, they can appreciate each other as human beings.

Community exegesis can be integrated into a larger theology of culture. Research that is so rich in detail about behavioral habits, attitudes and assumptions, tastes and priorities, challenges, and needs, can help church leaders understand the profound anxieties that drive the quest for God and shape the unique spiritualities today.

When a great artist paints a portrait, you can not only see the features of the subject, but discern their deeper motivations, ideals, and feelings. You can not only see what the subject looks like . . . you can sense the being of a real person. A "lifestyle segment" that shares similar behavior patterns also points toward anxieties and hopes, fears, desires, and spiritual yearnings that shape behavior. Like a great portrait, we can glimpse their quest for meaning and purpose. Just as the "progressive lenses" in community exegesis take us further into the complexity of community cultures, and deeper into urgent needs and spiritual yearnings of multiple publics, so also our empathy with diverse publics helps us focus and fine-tune our ministries and message.

The categories I developed have evolved from the existential and psychoanalytic philosophy of Paul Tillich. Different lifestyle groups are

driven by different existential anxieties and shape their spiritualities around different hopes.

- Emptiness and meaningless and the hope for truth and intimacy.
- Fate and death and the hope for freedom and new life.
- Guilt and shame and the hope for healing and vindication.
- Estrangement and displacement and the hope for acceptance and belonging.

Just as different people approached Jesus for different reasons (healing, justice, guidance, wisdom, transformation, belonging, companionship and more), so also, different people quest for God for different purposes, through different relationships, in different ways, for different outcomes. Lifestyle research generates "heartbursts" for mission. Our hearts open to someone other than ourselves. In a sense, living, breathing, persons appear in our dreams, and we feel great urgency to "come over and help" them.

Lifestyle Research Methodology and Ethics

American churches have access to sophisticated demographic and lifestyle search engines like *www.MissionInsite.com*. These include demographic and lifestyle data, along with surveys related to beliefs and values. Unfortunately, this is not readily available to churches in Canada and Australia. The reality is that church and secular lifestyle research is beyond the financial reach of these churches. They rely on a potpourri of data from other religious and secular agencies, and from disciplines of listening and observation in communities.

Whether you are able to access a website like *www.MissionInsite.com,* or use data from other non-profit or for-profit organizations, or rely solely on relational immersion for conversation and observation, you will need to establish filters or categories with which to understand the program options, leadership expectations, and spiritual yearnings of diverse groups. You may prefer other filters and categories than mine, but you *must* have some methodology to explore cultural diversity. We can no longer rely on our personal experiences and opinions, limited to the narrow band of our personal histories and friendship circles. A good methodology will include:

- Recognize and explore the complexities of cultural diversity, so that we better understand the publics under- or non-represented in

our churches, and the people we under-appreciate or even avoid in our communities.

- Integrate theology with other disciplines of sociology and social service, holistic health and psychotherapy, and technology and lifelong education.
- Connect with other public sectors, for-profit and non-profit, including corporate and retail business, media and communications, law and social justice, government policy and racial reconciliation.
- Collate demographic and psychographic research from the national census, independent surveys from both church and secular agencies.

Any filters and categories we develop must be consistently applied and as free from social bias or ideological agenda as possible.

Lifestyle research can be controversial because, like any tool that analyzes community diversity, it can be used for good or evil. It can be used to hurt people or help people, divide people or reconcile people, create myths or communicate truths. Four basic principles help guide the ethical use of this research.

✓ Use it for *empowerment,* not *manipulation.* The materialistic world tempts us to treat people as objects to be used for personal advantage or corporate gain. The philanthropic world encourages us to treat people as subjects who deserve respect. The more we understand the needs and preferences of different publics, the more we can work together to achieve each person's full potential.

Churches often expect newcomers to accommodate themselves to institutional aesthetics and habits. Now churches can use lifestyle research to adapt ministries of hospitality, worship, education, small and large groups, shape policies for accountability, and train leaders to help different groups to connect with God for different purposes, through different relationships, in different ways, for different outcomes.

✓ Use it for *segmentation*, not *segregation.* The two words sound similar but mean opposite things. *Segmentation* examines lifestyle groups to understand the dynamics of the whole mosaic of culture. It builds unity with empathy. *Segregation* studies lifestyle to separate groups from the larger mosaic of culture. It encourages inequality through condescension and even persecution.

Churches can use lifestyle data not only for *information about* different lifestyle groups but discover ways to *communicate between* lifestyle groups. We can identify the neutral locations, customize the most

hospitable environments, and find and equip the best mediators and catalysts who can host and facilitate understanding and reconciliation.

✓   Use it to *bless people*, not *recruit people*. Churches are tempted to use lifestyle research only to increase membership and stewardship for the purpose of institutional sustainability. Authentic faith communities, however, use it for the benefit of others without any reciprocal expectations. Church growth is secondary to the holistic needs of individuals and the positive transformation of society.

The more we empathize with the lives and lifestyles of the different publics in our community, the easier it becomes to set aside Christendom habits, look beyond membership entitlements, and think outside the box to bless strangers to grace. For Christians, lifestyle research results in what I call "heartbursts" for mission. Our hearts open to someone other than ourselves.

✓   Use it to *manage stress,* not *make judgements.* The more our hearts open, the more our lives change. It isn't easy for churches to shift attitudes, modify traditions, redeploy staff, retrain laity, renovate facilities, upgrade technologies, and reprioritize budgets. The frustration of leaders and the reluctance of members often creates unnecessary tension.

Lifestyle research allows us to compare membership preferences to community expectations. We can help members understand the missional rationale for the changes we make. We can be persuasive and avoid confrontation. We can make change through conversation rather than confrontation. "*The harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace*" (James 3:18).

The whole point of lifestyle research is to learn how to see, know and serve the whole diversity of a community, and discover how you can innovate, team, and empower staff and volunteers.

Lifestyle diversity is expanding exponentially. For example, just twenty years ago, digital research identified about 40 distinct segments in North America. Today there are over 71. The number will increase rapidly, especially as urbanization transforms small towns and rural life, and the internet makes even the smallest and most isolated communities more and more diverse. It is important to note, however, that there are *limitations* to the power of lifestyle research. The clustering methodology only works among publics who are "on the grid". However, there are people who leave few, if any, digital footprints to track. They are "off the grid".

The first group are people in remote or under-served areas, or in alternative cultures who are *indifferent* to the grid. These include aboriginal or indigenous people in Australia, Canada, and (less visibly but still

significant) the United States. The second group are people who have "fallen off" the grid or are only marginally connected to it. These include the growing numbers of homeless households who have no permanent address with which to attach the little digital activity they might generate.

Although these two groups are often lumped into generalized categories, they are, in fact, just as diverse in behavior as those who are trackable on the grid. The nuances of their needs and expectations must be "tracked" in different ways. Aside from immersive, relational methodologies (observing and listening) research falls into two categories. First, we can consult with health, social service, and religious agencies to get their insights. Second, we can study art and artifacts . . . from totems and urban graffiti to tools and crafts.

I can illustrate the power and limitation of lifestyle research from my consulting experiences in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast after the devastating hurricanes of 2007. It only took about a year for digital lifestyle research to track dislocated households forced from their homes. Non-Profits used this information to communicate, and eventually assist the re-homing of thousands of people. On the other hand, my work outside of New Orleans among poorer African American, Haitian, and Cajun households could not rely on digital footprints. We could only generate empathy via personal relationships, and by appreciating their cultures via arts and artifacts.

Churches must intentionally and daringly look beyond institutional survival to focus on community change. In part, this is about customizing ministry for people who, like it or not, are "on the grid". But also, this is about recognizing people who, like it or not, are "off the grid". Secular agencies are particularly adept at identifying the former for their own purposes. Churches must do the same for different reasons. Moreover, churches and other non-profit organizations must reach and bless that growing diversity of people who are left out.

Lifestyle research is what church leaders have needed for a long time. Imagine what might have happened to the mission to the Gentiles if St. Paul not only had a vision of a Macedonian pleading for Paul's team to "come over and help us" but could anticipate all the different kinds of Greeks . . . not to mention Ephesians, Romans, Canadians and Americans . . . hoping to experience the immanence of God in ways uniquely relevant to their physical needs and spiritual yearnings.

FINDING HOME VIA YELLOW BRICK DIGITAL ROADS
By Beth Hayward

Fun, games, serious science, and a big worry

I asked Siri recently if he's God. I use a rich baritone voice for my Apple assistant, and I've taken the liberty to assign it he/him pronouns. He replied to my question with this: "I'm not a robot or a person, I'm software here to help." I felt like he was avoiding the question, so I asked again: "Siri, are you God"? This time: "I'm a virtual assistant, not an actual person but you can still talk to me." It was disappointing. I was hoping to get a glimpse into what Siri's programmers have to say about the nature of God. Turns out they prefer to avoid the topic.

Artificial Intelligence (AI), the driver behind Siri and so many other "helps" we access daily, is pervasive throughout all aspects of our lives; from GPS maps that take the stress out of getting where we want to go, to those handy, and often annoying, autocorrect systems in text messages, to the ads that pop up on our screens presenting the precise product we just mentioned. The latest iteration of generative AI, Chat GPT, has gained tremendous popularity and some notoriety since its launch in November 2022. It can write prayers, teach the times tables, make medical diagnosis, translate, and write code.

AI is a broad and evolving field with many subsets. In general terms it refers to the ways machines simulate human intelligence. These systems simulate things such as learning, reasoning, and self-correcting. To name what machines do as intelligent is a stretch; they produce expected results given their objectives, or they generate new results, based on patterns. Troubles arise when we consider the truth that machines don't have objectives and the patterns they follow come from data sets of human patterns, which are often biased. In 2018, mega company Amazon scrapped its AI hiring algorithm after admitting it was biased against women, a result of being trained on data that itself was biased against women.[1] AI is only as woke as the people behind it.

In the past quarter century AI has beat humans at chess, Jeopardy, and to the giddy surprise of its creators, the ancient Chinese boardgame Go. In a grueling five game match in 2016, AI powered Alpha Go took

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[1] Jeffrey Dastin, "Insight – Amazon scraps secret AI recruiting tool that showed bias against women," *Reuters,* October 10, 2018*, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1MK0AG/.* (Accessed April 29, 2024).

down the world's Go champion Lee Sedol. The game is hundreds of times more complex than chess. What fun!

It's not just fun and games. In 2020 MIT researchers announced the discovery of a novel antibiotic, able to kill strains of bacteria that had been resistant. This was accomplished through training the AI with data in 2,000 known molecules. The AI then surveyed a library of 61,000 molecules and found one that fit the criteria of being a new antibiotic. It was named *halicin* after the character HAL from the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*.[2]

AI has the potential to facilitate fun, offer expedient solutions to problems that confound human minds, and according to a group of scientists and tech business leaders, to bring the world to the brink of existential crisis.[3] It's curious that those who create and bank roll AI's rapid advance to the tune of unthinkable amounts are also warning of its potential capacity to cause harm.

The same people who warn of the existential risk of AI do offer some antidotes. Sam Altman, CEO of Open AI, the force behind Chat GPT, suggests that artificial general intelligence can help us deal with problems created by AI in the first place.[4] This leaves one critic to query: "[If] the only way of dealing with the problem of AI is to [. . .] hand the problem to a more powerful AI [i]t becomes a very precarious question of pitting god-like systems against one another and hoping that the one fighting on our side is the stronger."[5] It shouldn't be a surprise that bigger and stronger is the AI developers answer to the question of threat. It's an age-old fix; tried, if not true.

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[2] Anne Trafton. "Artificial intelligence yields new antibiotic—A deep learning model identifies a powerful new drug that can kill many species of antibiotic-resistant bacteria." *MIT News Office*, February 20, 2020, *https://news.mit.edu/2020/artificial-intelligence-identifies-new-antibiotic-0220*. (Accessed April 19, 2024).

[3] In May 2023 a group of tech and business leaders, including Sam Altman, Bill Gates, and Geoffrey Hinton, released the following statement: "Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war." "Risk of extinction by AI should be global priority, say experts," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2023, *https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/may/30/risk-of-extinction-by-ai-should-be-global-priority-say-tech-expert*s. (Accessed April 29, 2024).

[4] Kester Brewin, *God-Like: A 500-Year History of Artificial Intelligence in Myths, Machines, Monsters* (Vaux Books, 2024), 12.

[5] Ibid., 12.

The fun, curious, and helpful things AI can achieve tend to be where most conversations about this life altering technology begin and end. Deeper questions about the ethics of how AI attains its data, whose interests are served, or just how much privacy ordinary people must relinquish to access the benefits of AI are presented as footnotes to discussions that ordinary citizens are led to believe they don't have the time or wits to engage. Johann Hari, in his book *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again*, writes the following:

> One day, James Williams—the former Google strategist I met—addressed an audience of hundreds of leading tech designers and asked them a simple question: "How many of you want to live in the world you are designing?" There was a silence in the room. People looked around them. Nobody put up their hand.[6]

Advances in AI are growing exponentially, its presence in our lives ubiquitous. Most of us are not paying attention. Theologians dismiss conversations about AI at our peril. As experts in the field of *meaning making*, we have a responsibility to bring expertise to bear on technology that is re-shaping every aspect of our common life.

AI – Deep down the religious rabbit hole

My curiosity about AI began a few years ago when I read an article in the *New York Times* entitled: "Can Silicon Valley Find God." Journalist Linda Kintsler referenced a scene from an HBO series, *Silicon Valley*. It was a satirical play on the tech world's aversion to all things religious. "You can be openly polyamorous, and people will call you brave. You can put microdoses of LSD in your cereal, and people will call you a pioneer, [. . .] but the one thing you cannot be is a Christian."[7] After a good laugh I went on to read this: "[AI] is ubiquitous, yet it remains obscured, invoked all too often as an otherworldly, almost godlike invention, rather than the product of an iterative series of mathematical equations."[8] I wondered:

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[6] Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again* (New York, Crown, 2022), 123.

[7] Linda Kintsler, "Can Silicon Valley Find God, *New York Times*, July 16, 2021, *https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/07/16/opinion/ai-ethics-religion.html. (Accessed April 29, 2023).*

[8] Ibid.

what are the implications of AI replacing God? What kind of God are we creating? What does it mean when humans create God anyway?

Reflecting more on Kintsler's article, I took a deep dive into AI and some troubling questions began bubbling to the surface. Who determines what ethics and values are baked into AI? Is AI intended to make our lives better, easier, or like so much in our world, is it one more expression of the market economy bringing the intricate balance of life to the brink? In a world where, for many, God is dead, is there any harm in appointing AI as a replacement? So intrigued by this idea that AI is an otherworldly godlike invention, I reached out to Kintsler to find out more. Here's what she said when I interviewed her on my podcast:

> AI cannot be the second coming, cannot be a god, because we cannot know God, we cannot create God, that's the kind of fundamental humility which frankly is not abundantly present in [Silicon Valley][. . .] that's why we need to have different perspectives going into the creation of AI.[. . .] It's not enchanted and yet we speak of it as if it is. And so, if we're going to infuse it, if we're going to speak about it in these religious metaphors, whether we regard them as religious or not, you need to have people from different faith backgrounds contributing to it because otherwise it will be dominated by possibly dangerous ideologies.[9]

It began to become clear that AI is like a new religion and the hidden few who control its application are the God behind it. In truth, they aren't God, they are the Wizard, and we keep following yellow brick digital roads they pave for us. Often without knowing it, we set our hearts, brains, and courage aside as we open our phones and are either enamored by the possibilities or shocked by the intrusion.

Employing God language without humility has been a source of great harm. Those who claim the identity of Christian have insisted on the terms of salvation, saying that it is reserved for the few who they determine as worthy. If AI saves us, who determines the criteria for salvation? Will some be left out? If the God that AI is becoming is all powerful and transcendent, how will ordinary citizens access this God? Christianity has a checkered past when it comes to its ability to differentiate between the

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[9] Linda Kintsler, "Souls in Soles S:2 E:4," *Beth Hayward*, March 23, 2022, *https://soulsinsoles.podbean.com/*, (Accessed April 29, 2024).

all-powerful God and the all-powerful institutions that define that God. I wonder if we might take the learnings from the damage done in the name of God and insist on a new framework for this pervasive technology. Instead, it seems that we have pulled a dead God, or one that ought to be dead, from another era and simply imposed it on this new thing. New wine, old wineskins.

When theologians abdicate responsibility for stewarding, and interpreting these words, they risk being used in ways that warp perspectives of God and humans, undermine our agency, and leave people disempowered. When we accept our powerlessness, we end up feeling helpless in the face of an almighty technology that we can't fully comprehend.

One of the primary ways we interact with AI is through algorithms, a term shrouded in mystery. "Look what the algorithm put on my screen!" "I feel like the algorithm is watching me." I imagine algorithms as a mass of human-shaped computer code, stealthily ambling about putting thoughts in my mind before I have the chance to think them. How an algorithm works is mysterious to most, leaving us to accord it to the realm of divine unknowable transcendence. What we don't fully appreciate is that algorithms did not arrive in our midst as some pre-formed entity, as a human made of clay and plunked down in a digital garden. Algorithms are the result of what creators create with code. Johann Hari, in conversation with former Google engineer Tristan Harris, blows the hot air out of the algorithm god. According to Hari "Tristan taught me that the phones we have, and the programs that run on them, were deliberately designed by the smartest people in the world to maximally grab and maximally hold our attention. He wants us to understand that this design is not inevitable."[10] When I read this, I stopped for a moment and let the weight of this truth settle in. Did I sense a whisper of empowerment, as I considered that algorithms don't have to be the way they are: that we might be able to reclaim some of our agency in relation to this unruly creation?

Silicon values

Years before AI's full infiltration into our lives, theologian Ian Barbour called for a redirecting of technology. Rather than serving the needs of corporations, governments, and economic structures, Barbour proposed that technology be redirected to serve the common good. He said that "the welfare of humanity requires a creative technology that is economically

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[10] Hari, *Stolen Focus,* 128.

productive, ecologically sound, socially just, and personally fulfilling."[11] Technology oriented to serve the common good sounds, not just like a noble cause, but an invitation rooted in gospel values.

As I learned more about what happens behind the veil of AI it became clear that consideration of what values are programmed into technology is rarely conscious and usually decided by computer programmers, not ethicists, policymakers, and certainly not theologians. AI doesn't have any objectives of its own, it must be programmed to "exist". This initial step is loaded with values and potential biases. Is this not an area of our common life that should be the business of faith? Tristan Harris left Google when he could no longer ignore what he viewed as a lack of commitment to ethics. This is what he spoke to an audience after leaving:

> "I want you to imagine walking into a room. A control room, with a bunch of people, a hundred people, hunched over a desk with little dials—and that that control room will shape the thoughts and feelings of a billion people. This might sound like science fiction, but this actually exists right now, today. I know because I used to work in one of those control rooms."[12]

Silicon Valley values are generally closer to corporate values than Gospel ones. This includes the values of free market capitalism, growth at all costs, profits above people. Gospel values are decidedly about the common good, about loving God and neighbour, about challenging systemic structures that leave people behind, about calling to account powers and principalities that value profit over people, individuality over interconnection. I'm not suggesting a colonizing of Silicon Valley by Christian values, rather some fundamental humility to keep dangerous ideologies at bay.

"[….]All the eternal questions have become engineering problems," [13] writes Meghan O'Gieblyn. As engineers approach a problem, they do so with their assumptions and values as well as their technical skills. If the problem is a human one—for example, how do I make changes to my health and lifestyle— the engineers behind the AI can apply certain code-based principles and we get something like the Weight Watchers app.

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[11] Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures Volume One* (Harper One, March 1, 1990), PAGE.

[12] Hari, *Stolen Focus,* 112.

[13] Ibid, 8.

Lots of regular feedback, helpful hints, meal plans, all designed to have a result for me. But let's take a different example, a more contentious one: will there be an app to guide us through the complexities, the moral discernment of Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID)? If the data goes into that app, and the conversations, the human struggles, the theological considerations are missing—what has been created?

The potential risks of the Silicon values are great. As we know from the many studies of "religion meets secularism" we dare not walk away or engage in a defensive battle with forces that have determined to dismiss religion. We need to clarify our thinking and engage this new reality of AI in our lives with faithfulness. We need to put forward Gospel values, not those professed by religion coopted by a twisted society, by capitalism, by neo-liberal rhetoric, or captivated by tradition, but life-affirming Christian values, the ones Jesus lived; things like radical hospitality and transformed relationships that create loving community where the last become first and the oppressed are raised up.

Silicon God
As AI continues at warp speed to infiltrate every aspect of our lives, I've noticed another troubling trend: all the worst popular assumptions about God are being resurrected to describe our relationship with AI. Our language of faith is slipping more and more into an earlier and potentially damaging construct: AI is rapidly becoming the all-powerful God who saves us. Surely, we are not going to settle for the small group of players behind the veil of AI playing the role of God. Why in the world would we go back to this old story with new technology?

"Today artificial intelligence and information technologies have absorbed many of the questions that were once taken up by theologians and philosophers: the mind's relationship to the body, the question of free will, the possibility of immortality[….]All the eternal questions have become engineering problems."[14] But the engineers are almighty God and that God has let us down time and again, failing to get us out of the binds we find ourselves in. Like a God who is separate from creation, all powerful, unmoved by the plight of humans. There is another God out there, or in here, one that I've come to know through a long journey of struggle and persistence, and curiosity. A God that has much to reveal about a way forward, a persuasive, relational God, who does not singlehandedly

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[14] Meghan O'Gieblyn, Meghan. *God, Human, Animal, Machine*, (New York, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2021), 8.

determine the future but calls to us moment by moment to partner in co-creating a world infused with kin-dom values.

Relational God
We're making God in our image when there are much better images of God to be found. The relational God I learned about as a child and further came to grasp through study and practice as an adult, might just have something to teach us about finding a way forward and discovering our voice in this important discussion.

A story: I remember standing beside the open casket at my grandfather's wake. I was nine years old, eye level with his powdery face and sharp jawline, peering into the casket. I could feel the cold of the wood, the satin, the body emanating out, seeping into my skin. It's the first memory I have of being aware of a tangible sense of the interconnection of all things, even the living and the dead. I hardly knew this grandfather, there was nothing I recognized in that casket. As I gazed at the body for what felt to my nine-year-old self like a very long time, I realized something was happening. Something strange. I heard my name called. I turned around and found no eyes in the room connecting to mine. I needed no convincing that the voice was that of my grandfather, reaching out in death in a way he never did in life. It was something of a comfort on that strange day. Later and older, I wondered if, in fact, I had heard the voice of God. Either way, what I longed for beside the casket that day was to be seen and known, to be in relationship, a possibility that had ended with my grandfather but which I could now pursue with verve and conviction with my God and people.

This relational God implies another way of being human, one where we resist the urge to play God, where strength is found in humility and vulnerability, where our relationship with God, the world, and one another, is all interconnected. As Kester Brewin suggests: "Perhaps our real salvation lies not in accepting that we are as gods, and finding ways to get good at it, but in truly coming to terms with the outrageous miracle of *human* being, of accepting that we are fragile, frail, forgetful, but with opposable thumbs and immense imaginations."[15] A relational God lifts up these values and can inform theologians and lay people who choose to speak up to the Wizards behind AI.

The relational God is written off by some as powerless or at best ineffectual. But I say, if we take truths about an open and relational God and expect similar from AI creators, as we would from such a God, we

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[15] Brewin, *God-like,* 193.

might find our theological voice in a conversation that has shut out religion and stolen our outdated language.

Promise behind the veil

I don't fool myself that this is easy or that it's a matter of just let religion in and all will be well with AI, goodness knows religion has its own checkered past. AI has impacted all areas of our lives and is here to stay. We can't stop it, but we can be smarter and more informed; we can demand more. The particular and unique role for people of faith is about the theological and ethical issues related to AI. We ought to be a voice that regulators hear, even if corporations aren't listening.

I care about AI because I care about people. I ache for people to have every opportunity to live life abundantly, for there to be enough for all, for values of care, mercy, and radical welcome to be embedded in every aspect of our common life. Maybe Siri's avoidance of the God questions revealed more than I first thought, maybe it was confirmation that AI will never truly be in relationship with us. I'm "not an actual person." No matter how much it imitates us, how much it reinforces our opinions like a deep conversation with a close friend over a warm beverage, AI is not truly capable of the essential human capacity for relationship.

I'm not sure if it's humans or the AI we create that has the greatest likelihood of becoming omnipotent, perhaps it's just a matter of degree. What I do know is that the sheer speed of AI advances mean we will soon be running to catch up. There is no going back, no putting it away for a while as we sort out the ethics. The time to reclaim our language and demand more is now.

AI might feel like a new and mysterious story, but it's rather age old. Countless tales wind their way along roads that make false promises and lead to wizards eventually revealed as the feeble humans they are. But even those stories can make their way to unexpected resurrections, when the characters choose to make their way home. Perhaps we can find our voice in the technology conversation by committing again and again to the values of our religious home. Maybe the software that is Siri and other AI iterations can be reshaped to help us co-create a world where no one is left behind.

LET'S BRING MARY IN FROM THE MARGINS
by Mac Watts

A couple of years ago I overheard a friend, a Mennonite academic, chuckling with a colleague over a recent Catholic devotional service he had attended. Apparently there was reference in the service to the "holy ever-virgin Mary." "Haven't they ever heard of Jesus' brothers and sisters?" he asked his colleague.

Our Catholic neighbours have certainly heard of them. Both Catholic and Orthodox Christians are part of a two millennia tradition that has assumed Joseph to have been a widower with children when he married Mary.[1] That's reflected in an ancient Christmas carol that begins "Now Joseph was an old man, And an old man was he." There are no instances in the Bible where the words half-brother or half-sister are used. They are always simply brother or sister; the long story in Genesis about Joseph and his brothers is probably the best illustration of how it plays out in the Bible. Of his many brothers only Benjamin had the same mother as Joseph, but all are always referred to as brothers.

So back to the Joseph and Mary story. Supposing we set aside, for a moment, the non-canonical account about Joseph being a widower with children, and look only at what we find in the Gospels. There we discover Jesus must have had at least *seven* siblings. Where's the evidence for that? Well, in Mark's account, when Jesus generates astonishment with a homily in his home synagogue, people say to one another after the service: Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't his mother Mary? Aren't his brothers (and the four are named)? Aren't his sisters with us? (Mark 6:1-3) At least two sisters, then. But in Matthew, though the story goes the same way, the final question is "aren't *all* his sisters with us?" (Matt 13:54-56) So there must have been at least three, and thus a *minimum* of seven siblings in all. If all

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[1] The first written source for this is to be found in the *Protoevangelium of James*, by far the most widely read, and most influential, of all the so-called "Aprocryphal Gospels" from the second century. There we find that Mary was the long-awaited and only child of Anna and Joachim, a devout couple from Jerusalem, who placed her in the care of the temple at an early age. In due course Joseph, a widower with children, became her guardian, and with whom she became engaged. The story then largely reflects Luke's account, though their entrance into Bethlehem finds her on a donkey led by Joseph's older son, James. Joseph's frantic search for a mid-wife and eventually returning with two, only to find that Mary has already given birth, provides an amusing human touch to the whole narrative.

are Mary's offspring does it affect any other stories we find in the Gospels? I think so. Here's one.

"Now every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. And when he was twelve years old they went up as usual for the festival." If Mary was in the process of bearing and looking after several children younger than Jesus the journeys to Jerusalem would have been very arduous indeed. The trip from Nazareth, taking at least three days, would have been done on foot. The donkeys would be used to carry supplies, not people. The story indicates that they were travelling as a group, some being relatives. Was that enough to support a possible pregnant Mary with little children around her ankles? I am sceptical. And the account of Mary and Joseph rushing back to Jerusalem to find a missing Jesus—and not succeeding until after a panic search in the city for three days!—gives no hint whatever that they were encumbered with little children, or a pregnancy.

But let's carry on looking at the Gospels. Joseph doesn't appear at all in Mark or John, but Mary is in both—in John she is even at the crucifixion. In Matthew Joseph plays a central role in the nativity story, but after they return from Egypt and locate themselves in Nazareth there are no other appearances of him in the Gospel, while Mary continues to appear. If Joseph had still been around when Jesus' delivered the homily referred to in Matthew and Mark I think the question would more likely have been "Isn't his father Joseph?" rather than "Isn't his mother Mary?" In Luke Joseph isn't heard about again after the Jerusalem visit when Jesus is 12, but we do hear of Mary. Indeed Luke locates Mary as being among the approximately120 people that met regularly after Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:14) which was the group upon whom the Spirit descended at Pentecost. And to this day there is a tablet in Ephesus, erected and preserved by the Muslims, designating where Mary may have lived into her old age under the care of the apostle John.

So even if the tradition that Joseph was a widower with children doesn't come from any New Testament texts, it fits with what we find in the Gospels, in a way that designating Mary as the birth-mother of all the brothers and sisters does not. Christian artists in their renderings of the nativity, or of Mary and Joseph's wedding, have portrayed her as a very young woman and him as a middle- aged man. To assume Joseph died before Jesus' ministry began, being quite a bit older than Mary, is consonant with the drift in the Gospels. Though the traditional assumption that Jesus was Mary's only child is not *stated* in the Gospels it fits more comfortably with what we find in them than does making her the mother of a large brood younger than Jesus.

The first of my two reasons for raising the issue I have discussed so far is to invite readers to reconsider the outlook that allows us in the United Church to leave Mary so far out on the margins. It's true we read the birth stories each Christmas, and sing about them in the carols. But once Christmas is over Mary is forgotten. I think most readers will realize this to be true, but if any need convincing consider the evidence in *Celebrate God's Presence*, the large loose-leaf liturgical book which the United Church published in 2000. In the communion liturgy, Prayer B, the Eucharistic prayer includes the names of Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, Miriam, Esther, Ruth and David, but there is no reference to Mary (pp. 243f). In the communion liturgy, Prayer F, the Eucharistic prayer names Sarah and Abraham, Moses and Miriam, Deborah and Isaiah, but not Mary. Prayer G has the names of Abraham, Sarah and Moses but not Mary.[2] Prayer I is a reproduction of a 2nd century Eucharistic prayer where the "Virgin", not surprisingly, is referred to twice. Prayer J, from a Presbyterian source refers simply to Jesus being born of Mary. There is a blessing that contains the name of Mary, but she is just one in a list of seven biblical women referred to (p. 658). But worst of all, with all this neglect of Mary, Prayer H refers to Jesus having "learned the breadth of your (i.e. God's) grace from a Gentile mother"! (p. 262) This is based on very unconvincing exegesis of the story of Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30). In that exegesis the common interpretation that Jesus is pushing the woman in the hope she might offer the kind of response she eventually does, is rejected, and instead she is given credit for helping a naively Jewish-centred Jesus to see beyond the confines of the people of Israel. Really? Perhaps the most famous mini-story in the world came from that "naively Jewish-centred Jesus", where the hero of the story is a *Samaritan*!

If we want to find a *woman* involved in teaching Jesus things he needed to know, why avoid the one person who actually fills the bill? Mary not only nourished Him first at her breast, but in those early formative years provided sustenance for Him mentally and spiritually at her knee, around her table, and at the bedside. Since we know Jesus could read—though it was unusual for a carpenter to have that skill—Mary is most

[2] We find Beverly Gaventa, Professor of New Testament at Princeton, pointing to the same situation in her Church. She says the "Brief Statement of Faith" issued by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1991, "lifts up Sarah, but it makes no reference, direct or indirect, to Mary the Mother of Jesus." *Mary Mother of God,* ed. Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994) 20.

likely the one who played a role in making that come about. The post-birth stories in Luke indicate what devout and observant people both Mary and Joseph were (Luke 2:21-40), confirmed later with the declaration that they took the tough journey to Jerusalem every year for Passover.

The side-lining of Mary has been going on for a long while. I think of it just within my life-time. At university in the late 1940s I became involved with the Student Christian Movement, and found that a necessary way to demonstrate one's intellectual credentials was to display scepticism about the Virgin Birth. When I entered the Faculty of Theology in Winnipeg in 1950 my fellow students and I were introduced to New Testament texts like the one quoting Isaiah: "a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel." It was almost gleefully pointed out to us that the Hebrew in the Isaiah passage says nothing about a virgin, but simply that a young woman will conceive and bear a son. It was only some years later I learned that virtually all the quotations from the Scriptures in the New Testament writers are from the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), and in that version the Isaiah text reads that it is a *virgin* who will conceive.

My teachers in the Faculty of Theology, whom I remember with enormous gratitude and respect, affirmed the incarnation, but it was as though for them, as it was for most in the liberal Protestant community, that Jesus somehow became the incarnate Son of God at the moment of His birth. That Mary bore Him was of little importance. I came away with the same outlook. That the Son of God, who was also God the Son, became a fertilized egg in Mary's womb the moment she responded to the angel with the words "Let it be with me as you have said," was something we never considered.

But it was central in Christians' minds for centuries, and *from the very beginning*. When the newly-pregnant Mary turns up at her cousin Elizabeth's door she is greeted effusively by Elizabeth, who concludes by saying, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:45). In liberal Protestant circles the question would inevitably be raised about how on earth it could be known that Elizabeth would say anything like that. But that applies to everything in the Gospels. They all draw on the memory bank of the immediate successors of the apostles. So what we do know is that in that memory bank Mary's consent to the angelic message was of vital importance. And it remained so. In the history of Christian art we find that, next to the crucifixion, the most frequently painted scene is not the nativity

but the annunciation![3] The artists were reflecting the common belief that that was the moment when God quietly and invisibly slipped into human history. *And He slipped in with Mary's assent.* As is made clear in artistic renderings of the annunciation, the conception came through Mary's ear! Of all the women in Israel's history Mary was chosen by God for this role, and that was not something the Christian community thought was a side issue. Mary stayed in the centre with Jesus Christ in the Church's life and devotions. Instead of seeing her as serving a typically woman's *submissive* role, as has often been asserted in Protestant feminist literature, she was perceived to have offered the most significant act of faith in human history.[4]

If readers of this article have reservations about how devotion in the Church toward Mary developed over the centuries, I have many of the same. It's as well to remember, however, that even though we all have reservations about the interpretation of the Scriptures by North American fundamentalists, we haven't as a result thrown away the Bible. But that seems to be what our tradition of Protestantism did with Mary, in reaction to what was considered excesses in the Catholic Church's portrayal of her.[5]

If Mary is to be drawn back into our working theology and devotion, we might start with a simple step: mark the annunciation. Once the Church chose December 25 as the day to celebrate Jesus' birth, March 25 became the day to observe the annunciation and conception. I know we read the annunciation story at Advent and Christmas services, and we will naturally continue to do that. But getting a feel of the *time line* is important and that could happen if we were to mark the annunciation at the March date. The first response to that suggestion might be that we shouldn't interrupt Lent. But the seasons (Advent and Lent) are there to serve the festivals, which celebrate the central narrative of Christ's life, and not vice

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[3] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through The Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 81.

[4] There are places today where the annunciation remains a big deal. Katie Kirk tells of a moment in 2022 when she was sitting in the main square in Krakow, Poland. The clock struck noon and at once church bells all over began to ring. People left their work places and streamed into the church closest to them. She found out that they had gone to pray the Angelus, a short prayer remembering the annunciation. (*The Christian Century*, December 2023, 27).

[5] A few years ago three struggling United churches that were strung along St. Mary's Road in Winnipeg decided to amalgamate, and they chose as the name for the combined congregation, St. Mary's Road United Church. I asked one of the ministers involved in the process if they ever considered simply St. Mary's United as the name. His reply was terse: "*Never!*".

versa. The second response is likely to be that there is no way people are going to turn up on a week-day to mark the annunciation. Of course they won't. But consider: Remembrance Day falls on a Sunday only occasionally, but that's no problem for us; we simply use the Sunday closest to November 11 for our observance. We could follow the same custom with Annunciation Day. That would work most years, except perhaps when Easter is very early, and Palm Sunday, for instance, would have to take precedence over Annunciation. Even on that day, though, there could be a brief reference to the annunciation. (After all, we never hesitate to insert other things that are important to us even though it's on a special day in the Christian calendar.) Anyway, it doesn't have to be a big deal; putting at the top of the bulletin "Annunciation Sunday" is the first thing; then reading the story in Luke of the angel's encounter with Mary; singing a hymn on the theme;[6] and referring to her in the prayers that Sunday; these would be a fine start. Including her name in the Eucharistic prayers on Communion Sundays would be a helpful additional step. Reciting the Song of Mary from time to time would also be a good idea. And drawing attention to the words in that Song, "And all generations will call me blessed" might conceivably lead to it being true one day even in The United Church of Canada.

About 50 years ago the national Christian Education office of our Church sent out a story, for use in our congregations, about how kind and helpful Jesus had been with his *younger* siblings. Even at that point in my development I had a very negative gut reaction to the story. It wasn't just that they were pulling something out of the air, not out of any of the Gospels, and following a common moralistic portrayal of Jesus; it was also that they were blithely ignoring centuries of belief that Jesus was Mary's only offspring. Since then a good many writers have influenced me in my growth in awareness of Mary's place in the scheme of things. There is space for me to mention only one, Lady Julian of Norwich. Her wonderful work *Showings* (or *Revelation of Divine Love*), written toward the end of the 14th century, came out of a profound revelation experience she received. It's a very Trinitarian exposition, with God the Son being referred to a number of times as our Mother. Jesus is all warmth and commitment, though with Julian, Mary's long-cherished role is not side-lined. "So our Lady is our mother, in whom we are all enclosed and born of her in Christ, for she who is mother of our saviour is mother of all who are saved in our saviour, and our saviour is our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born

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[6] *Voices United* contains three fine hymns to choose from, No.s 12, 14, & 16.

and out of whom we shall never come."[7] In another place Lady Julian describes additional things that had been revealed to her: "[I saw] truly that Mary is greater, more worthy, more fulfilled, than everything else which God has created, and which is inferior to her. Above her is no created thing, except the blessed humanity of Christ, as I saw."[8]

This leads me to the second of the two reasons I embarked on in this article, which is to bring attention to the need for us to draw our sustenance from the *whole* of the unique Christian narrative. We are prone in our church to pull Jesus out of the narrative and deal with Him simply as the best of teachers of general moral and religious truths and the best of moral examples. Years of this have left its mark on our members: in the part of the United Church I know best, I think the special days in the year that are closest to the hearts of most folk are, in the order of emotional engagement, Christmas (leagues ahead of all others), Remembrance Day, Mother's Day, Easter, Palm Sunday, Thanksgiving, with Good Friday trailing far behind. But to access the Gospel treasure we need the *whole* narrative of the Christ-event, and *all* the festivals and seasons to keep drawing us into the matchless story of Jesus Christ. I have for years been asserting the need to celebrate Ascension Sunday. I feel that when we mark the ascension we are not only celebrating Jesus' glorification, which is referred to so often throughout the New Testament, but also that God is *still incarnate in Jesus Christ*. Significantly, in his sermon at Pentecost, Peter makes clear that the giving of the Spirit comes as a direct consequence of Jesus' ascension, and *Jesus* is the one who sends the Spirit! (Acts 2: 32, 33) Anyway, I am here proposing that we should also start marking the annunciation, which is the first in the events of the unparalleled New Testament story. That story, of course, is a fulfilment of promises given in the foundational story, the one that starts with Abraham and Sarah. It was a faithful young maiden among their centuries-extended progeny who was chosen to become the Mother of God.

Mother of God: By the use of that title am I not separating myself from my Protestant brothers and sisters? From many certainly, but not all. For instance, none other than Karl Barth wrote that "Mother of God language for Mary is sensible, permissible, and necessary" (*CD*, Volume I, Number 2, 138). For another instance, in 2002 an ecumenical conference was held at the Lutheran College in Minnesota, St. Olaf's, where the theme was "Mary, Mother of God." Presentations were made by seven high profile scholars, whose denominational background was varied,

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[7] Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, (Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978) 292.
[8] Ibid., p. 182.

Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. Those presentations were published by Eerdmans in 2004 under the title *Mary Mother of God*, edited by Carl E Braaten and Robert W. Jenson. Anyone who picks up that volume will find that there have been distinguished Protestants trying to draw Mary back in from the margins before I ever thought of it.

MINISTRY AMONG THE RUINS: TOWARDS A LOW-TECH ECCLESIOLOGY
by Paul Miller

Getting With the Times

For Christians, 2025 will be a year of milestones—the centennial of The United Church of Canada, the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicea, eighty years since the end of World War II and the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It will also be sixty years since the publication of *The Comfortable Pew* by Pierre Berton. Berton, a well-known Canadian author and commentator, was commissioned by the Anglican Church of Canada to give an outsider's frank assessment of the condition of mainline Christianity in a rapidly changing Canada.

Mainline Christianity—Anglican, Presbyterian, United, Lutheran—was riding high in the mid-sixties. Existing churches were full and new churches could not be built fast enough to meet the demand. But there was already an underlying dis-ease, a sense of foreboding that the church's influence was beginning to slip. Berton was asked to issue a wake-up call to a complacent denomination. The book's subtitle was *A Critical Look at the Church in the New Age* and Berton's verdict was clear: "The church must get with the world or it will surely perish."[1] By "getting with the world," Berton meant delivering a message more in keeping with a culture undergoing a radical transformation. In a word, Berton argued, people are deserting the church because they are bored. "The liturgy is 'dull and old-fashioned,' the words archaic, the sermons cliché-ridden and irrelevant to the times, the organ music 'square,' the congregation lifeless."[2] How should the church respond? Updated language, more approachable clergy catchier music, "hard-hitting" sermons "relevant" to issues of the day, like civil rights and nuclear arms. "Why cannot a clergyman," Berton asked cheekily, "wear a crimson sports jacket instead of funereal black?"[3] Radical stuff in the sixties.

Two summers ago I reread *The Comfortable Pew.* It was a strangely disorienting experience. On the one hand, it stirred up memories of a distant time. But at the same time, it evoked a strange sense of familiarity. Berton, I realized, was describing, from his vantage point in 1965, the future course of the mainline church. While the details of his

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[1] *The Comfortable Pew: A Critical Look at the Church in the New Age,(*Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1965*)*
[2] *The Comfortable Pew,* 105.
[3] *The Comfortable Pew,* 106.

prescription seem as quaint and outdated as a Herman's Hermits' 45, he pretty much nailed the strategy the United Church would pursue with diminishing returns for the next sixty years. Despite a storm of controversy and backlash from the pews, mainline denominations took its message to heart. We threw open the windows and tossed out musty old ideas and practices. Clergy came down from their pedestals and previously reviled lifestyle choices were accepted—celebrated, even. We critiqued our "dead white men" theological heritage and proclaimed justice and inclusion from our pulpits.

All of this, however, did not result in relevance and growth but in steady, accelerating decline.

Cultivating the Cultural Mainstream
The last sixty years can be seen as an ongoing attempt to apply what Harvard Professor and leadership expert Ronald Heifetz calls "technical solutions" to "adaptive challenges."[4] Heifetz distinguishes two kinds of change. One is change that can be managed with current know-how and expertise. Problems where a clear cause and effect structure and solutions are near to hand. The boiler is broken. We need to fix it. We don't have the money to fix it. Let's launch a Stewardship Campaign.

Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, "are embedded in social complexity, require behavior change, and are rife with unintended consequences." [5] They do not respond to merely technical fixes. New imagination and new paradigms are needed.

Most church leaders have been trained to be technical fixers. We know what to do, but we need to do it better. *The Comfortable Pew,* as radical as it seemed at the time, starts with the premise that people are open to participating in a church, they just have to be convinced that our church will meet their needs. This has turned out to be mis-identification of the nature of the adaptive challenge we face. The underlying assumptions of what a church ought to be and how to be that church are largely

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[4] Heifetz outlines his theory of technical and adaptive change in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Your Organization and the World,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009). A short video, "The Nature of Adaptive Leadership" which summarizes his theory and makes reference to religious communities can be found at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfLLDvn0pI8&t=17s.

[5] Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin, Monique Sternin, *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems,* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2010) 7-8.

unquestioned. We have assumed that if we can just be sufficiently relevant and appealing, people will like us and join us. The root question in a largely unchurched culture is: "Why would anyone who does not already belong to this church want to get out of bed on Sunday morning, or give up doing all the other things they could be doing, to be part of this community?"

Congregations often blame Sunday morning competition, thinking that if it weren't for hockey and horseback riding, the families would be in church. But, according to sociologist Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone,*[6] church decline is merely one symptom of a society-wide revolution in the way people gather and find belonging. Putnam describes the twentieth century as a golden age of joining. A whole range of associations benefited from this phenomenon, including services clubs, political organizations, neighbourhood groups—and churches. Since the end of World War II, people's social patterns and associational habits have become increasingly individualistic. The title of Putnam's book refers to the fact that, while more people are participating in recreational bowling, organized bowling leagues are disappearing. If people are bowling, it's with a few friends, or by themselves.

Putnam's insights, although written from an American perspective, describe the Canadian context. If he is correct, and I think he is, people are not abandoning churches because they have rejected God or are hostile to religion. They just aren't interested in joining something that requires a long-term commitment of time and energy.[7]

The self-understanding of mainline churches, and especially The United Church of Canada, has made us especially vulnerable to this social revolution. The United Church was conceived as a religious tent big and broad enough to encompass the mainstream of Canadian society. It was to be a "church with the soul of a nation," in the words of church historian Phyllis Airhart.[8] "[Church] Union was an effort to reinvigorate an old idea: the partnership between church and state in building a Canadian society."[9]

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[6] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[7] People often blame competing Sunday activities like children's sports for the absence of families in church. These activities are more symptomatic than causal. Sports leagues are also in decline. The all-pervasive nature of social media has accentuated a shift from being part of groups to being alone. COVID 19 has accelerated this change even more.

[8] Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church With the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada,* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).

[9] *A Church with the Soul of a Nation,* 4.

The vision of "building a Christian nation" began to wane fairly quickly after 1925. But the idea that the United Church should reflect the spiritual and moral character of Canadian society has remained.

Not all churches think like this. A woman I know who consults extensively with churches grew up in a German Mennonite community. Her religious and social identity was deeply marked by a sense of being different, of being outside the mainstream. She told me that she was surprised when she started working with United churches how much their self-image was shaped by a desire to be at the social and cultural centre, and how different from her experience that was.

While the United Church tends to see itself as on the "cutting edge" of, and out in front of, Canadian society as a whole historically, we have been more of a follower than a leader in this regard. We have sought to be in step with and to adapt to wider societal change. For example, William Haughton has written a detailed study of the evolution of that distinctively United Church document, The New Creed. First adopted in 1968, The New Creed was a self-conscious attempt to create a confession of faith that would align with the human-centred orientation of post-War existentialism. Two subsequent revisions of the Creed, in 1980 and 1995, were explicit responses to the influence of Second Wave feminism and the ecological movement, respectively.[10]

The United Church's identity has been defined by its progressive social commitments. Those commitments have evolved over the years, from temperance and opposition to gambling, to nuclear disarmament, civil rights and feminism, to today's emphasis on anti-racism, anti-colonialism, full LGBTQ+ affirmation and Indigenous truth and reconciliation. These commitments have largely mirrored the evolving social, moral and spiritual convictions of mainstream Canadian society. We have believed that if we resonate with contemporary social mores, people will be attracted to the church. The outcome, however, has been the opposite. People say, "I can support all these just and righteous causes in my own way. Why do I need the church?"[11] In our quest to appeal to the

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[10] William R. H. Haughton, *The Search for a Symbol: "A New Creed" and The United Church of Canada,* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022). See also William Haughton, "United Church Archeology: The Case of a New Creed," *Touchstone* 40:3 (Oct 2022), 19-28.

[11] This is not an exclusively mainline issue. Russell Moore, who headed the Ethics and Religious Freedom Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention was forced to leave not only his position but his denomination for his public refusal to bow the knee to Donald Trump. Moore offered the following diagnosis of

broad mainstream, we have combined liberal attitudes to sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, climate action and racial and gender justice, with a downplaying of the distinctive aspects of Christian faith that clash with mainstream sensibilities, such as a high view of Biblical authority, the uniqueness of Christ and the Trinity. While this might make people think well of us, it has actually undermined the motivation to join a church.

In 2006, marketing research paid for by the United Church, revealed that young adults—that perennial "missing generation"—were actually quite sympathetic to the Church's progressive stands on sexuality and human rights. The church launched an advertising campaign in several prominent magazines, famously including ads featuring a bobble-head Jesus, a can of whip cream with the caption "How fun can sex be before it's a sin?" and a wedding cake top with two men in tuxedos.[12] The campaign coincided with the launch of Wonder Café, a (for the time innovative) interactive chat-room that provided space for conversation on spiritual, moral and religious topics. While the official line was that none of this was intended to "get people into church,"[13] it was clearly a branding exercise that was expected to bear some fruit, otherwise, why spend $10 million on it?

It is heartening to know that the United Church is widely admired. But in hindsight, this admiration has made it less, not more, likely that people will actually connect with a United Church. Having affirmed their belief that you can be "good without God," people have concluded they can "seek justice and resist evil" without the aggravation of belonging to a church.

A number of years ago, I heard church consultant Alan Roxburgh compare modern Protestant denominations to vertically integrated corporations with a head office at the top setting policy and producing

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the malaise of American Evangelicalism: 'People saw that Christianity was a means to an end, and they realized they could get to that end without Christianity, We were no longer distinctive. The focus was on values and worldview and identity in ways that obscured the distinctiveness of the message itself.' Quoted in Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicalism in an Age of Extremism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2023) 96.

[12] I was surprised at how few sources of information about this campaign a Google search turns up. Here's one. *https://toronto.citynews.ca/2006/11/07/united-church-launches-controversial-humour-campaign-featuring-jesus/*.

[13] Although the headline of an article in *The Globe and Mail* read, "Church aims to fill pews". *https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ad-campaign-aims-to-fill-the-pews/article1109637/*.

resources, and a network of "branch plants" or "retail outlets," selling the "product" and sending funds to run the whole organization.[14] As the "branch plants" (i.e, congregations) have declined, however, this model has become increasingly unsustainable. Since the denominational structures depend on congregations to fund them, a wise long-term strategy might have been to focus single mindedly on both strengthening existing congregations and planting new ones. That has not been the case. Since the 2018 restructuring of the United Church, which saw the disappearance of Presbyteries as the main locus of "episcopal" authority, local-denominational interaction has focused more and more on policy compliance and risk management. The denomination's current survival plan seems to be to cannibalize itself by taking resources from the sale of church properties.

We have been searching for the right technique, the "one best way" (to quote sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul)[15] to sustain a church that has ceased to be thought of as a means to an end and become an end in itself. I am convinced that our current situation does not demand a technical solution so much as a deep reorientation of our basic ecclesiology. What is the church? What is the church for? What is its purpose, the end for which it exists? Why does it matter if our brand of church survives? Does it matter? And if so, what shape should that church take?

Ministry Among the Ruins
I retired in 2018 after thirty-seven years in congregational ministry. Ministry has been deeply rewarding for me, filled with countless joys and blessings. But I have come to see my ministry as a four-decade quest for the key that would unlock the door to a revitalized and growing church. On reflection, I realize how deeply I internalized Pierre Berton's implicit criticism—that the church had better get with the times or it will die—expressed in the long list of strategies I pursued in the hopes of slowing, stopping and reversing the downward trend. Educational strategies, marketing strategies, visitation strategies, liturgical strategies, stewardship strategies, staffing strategies, evangelism strategies, discipleship strategies, technological strategies, musical strategies, I've tried them all.

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[14] This might sound like a crass way to describe the church, but the denomination's own Edge Network picked up the metaphor and ran with it in the early 2000s with its "More Franchises than Tim Horton's" workshops.

[15] Jacques Ellul. *The Technological Society,* John Wilkinson, trans., (New York: Vintage Books, 1964) 77.

They were the means to revive a church that regarded itself as an end in itself, rather than the means to a greater end.

In 2020, I did something I vowed I would never do. I came out of retirement to accept a half-time appointment at Westminster United Church in St. Catharines, Ontario. Westminster is located in the most disadvantaged neighbourhood in the Niagara Region. A historic working class community, it was gutted by the departure of manufacturing jobs in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Next door to the church is ten acres of rubble and weeds that was once the old General Hospital which closed in 2013. Several redevelopment plans for this property have come and gone, and the site remains a blighted eyesore in the heart of the community. Westminster is an example of what author and professor Ruth Tucker has called a "left-behind church."[16]

But in this unpretentious congregation I am catching glimpses of what mainline resilience might look like in a culture of religious indifference. Each Sunday, about sixty people gather in the gorgeous 400 seat sanctuary, built in 1926. The congregation has a clear and unapologetic sense of who they are. They have a remarkable capacity for friendship and a passionate commitment to a neglected and distressed neighbourhood. Beginning life in 1876 as Haynes Avenue Presbyterian Church, Westminster has always been a neighbourhood church. Like the surrounding community, they know better than to pretend to be something they are not. They remember the days of full pews and lots of kids but they don't let that memory get them down. They are without pretense and without guile. They make decisions quickly, without conflict, drama or sabotage, including the recent decision to build 39 desperately needed units of rental housing on our large and underused parking lot.

To my surprise, I have found greater freedom for ministry in this "left-behind" church than I did in all the years of anxiously striving to "turn the church around." I am free to simply preach the Gospel, care for the people, and represent the church in the neighbourhood, not to rescue it from a bleak future. There is a real sense that God has sustained this church for almost a century and a half, and that God will continue to do so in the future, even if we can't quite see how. As many larger, more programme centred congregations have amalgamated or closed, Westminster carries on.

I recognize that I am privileged in ways that most of my non-retired colleagues are not. I am the beneficiary of forty years of

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[16] Ruth A. Tucker, *Left Behind in a Megachurch World: How God Works Through Ordinary Churches,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006).

contributions to pension plans. My house is paid for. I do not have a family to support. But this is where we are. And I have found fresh insight in asking the question, "What does ministry look like here, among the ruins?"

We assume that adaptive challenges call for bold, innovative responses. I wonder, having experimented with innovation *Comfortable Pew*-style for so long, whether our call is more about a return than a repudiation—to see, with T. S. Eliot, that

> …the end of our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[17]

Low-Tech Ecclesiology

Could it be that we need a more "low tech ecclesiology"? Not low tech in the sense of getting rid of the computers and going back to mailing letters. But low-tech in the sense of freeing ourselves from dependence on church growth strategies and tactics in the desperate search for the approval and affirmation of an increasingly secularized culture, so we can keep going a configuration of church that has existed for a brief moment in the history of Christianity, and may have outlived its usefulness. Low tech in the sense of simply letting the church be what the church is meant to be: the community of those who know and follow the way of Jesus.

What would be the main features of a low-tech ecclesiology? First, it would be *non-triumphalist.* Triumphalism takes different forms. One is the belief that the church should cultivate worldly power and influence. But there is also what Ruth Tucker calls "the triumphalism of relevance,"[18] a striving to be regarded as socially and politically significant, particularly with influential elites. Former mega-church pastor and church planter Dan White, Jr., captures the essence of low-tech ecclesiology thus: "For 2000 years, the most relevant church has always been the one gathering around a table, caring for the neighborhood, following the words and ways of Jesus."[19]

Low-tech ecclesiology will affirm, with Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, that "to recognize that the church is a minority is not a statistical but a theological observation."[20] A low-tech ecclesiology is at

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[17] "Little Gidding," in T. S. Eliot, *The Collected Plays and Poems, 1909-1950,* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1962) 145.

[18] Ruth Tucker, *Left Behind in a Mega-Church World,* 70.

[19] X (formerly Twitter), January 24, 2022: *https://twitter.com/danwhitejr/status/1484152592271876097?s=27.*

[20] John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and*

peace with the church's marginal status. It understands that the church's call is to be outside the mainstream, not to blend into the mainstream. While striving to seek justice and resist evil, a low-tech ecclesiology is always grounded in the humility of the One who emptied himself, taking the nature of a servant.

Low-tech ecclesiology will prioritize the local gathering over national and regional denominational structures. Insofar as those structures exist, it will be to support, resource and empower local communities.[21] Low tech ecclesiology is not tied to an arbitrary definition of a viable congregation. We have been trained to think that many of our churches are too small to survive because they cannot support an inherited infrastructure of large, aging buildings and expectations of full-time paid ministry as the norm. Maybe "getting with the times" means learning to see that a congregation of 40 to 60 is not a failure, or a poor shadow of what the church should be, but simply the size appropriate to our current mission.[22]

Author and pastor Mike Breen has championed the concept of "missional communities"—groups of thirty to fifty people who meet for worship, mutual support, prayer and commitment to a specific localized mission. Eschewing cumbersome governance structures, missional communities are "lightweight and low maintenance." "If the Missional Community can't be led by people with normal 9-5 jobs who aren't paid to do it, it's not lightweight and low maintenance enough."[23] Many of our congregations are missional community-size already. Could they reimagine themselves into a form that is both fruitful and sustainable?

Ecumenical, Michael G. Cartwright, ed., (Herald Press: Scottsdale, PA, 1998, 175.) This observation could help us to reconnect with our non-conformist, Free Church heritage bequeathed to us by our Congregationalist founders.

[21] Lesslie Newbigin notes that the most common name for the church in the New Testament is *ekklēsia,* "the secular word for the assembly of citizens . . . in which the business of the city is dealt with." The *ekklēsia tou Theou,* the assembly of citizens summoned, not by the town clerk, but by God. *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian,* Paul Weston, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) 132.

[22] As church consultant Eric Hoke has written: "The average church in the US is 65 people, I'm not an anti church growth guy but to me 65 seems like a sweet spot for churches." X (formerly Twitter) March 4, 2024. *https://twitter.com/erichoke/status/1764033961838166143.*

[23] Mike Breen, "5 Essential Ingredients of Missional Communities," *https://vergenetwork.org/2012/06/25/5-essential-ingredients-of-a-missional-community-mike-breen/".*

Low tech ecclesiology will require denominations to find ways to reduce the financial and compliance burdens that weigh congregations down. It will pursue community-building practices that foster strong relationships and, above all, the one thing that which distinguishes the church from other social agencies—the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The twentieth century church was conceived of as an organization with a religious product to market. Much energy has been expended searching for ways to make the church acceptable to an increasingly secularized culture in the hopes that we can recapture our market share. Instead, we need to embrace our countercultural nature, our outsider status, to embrace and even lean into the essential weirdness of Christian community. It is time to recover more organic and biblical models of the church: as the *ekklesia,* the gathered people; as branches connected to the vine; as the Body of Christ. Our ecclesiology needs to begin with the nature and purpose of the church, and whatever organization form we take must grow out of those models. With Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we need to realize that Christian community is a gift to be received with gratitude in whatever size or shape it occurs,[24] and leave the future of the church where it belongs, in the hands of God.

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[24] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* John W. Doberstein, trans, (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1954) 17.

FROM THE HEART: WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM WALKING
By Rob Fennell

I don't remember my first step, nor my second or third. I don't remember the first long walk I took. I don't remember discovering that I loved walking, especially long distances. But somewhere along the way, before the age of 20, I found myself enjoying the long walk for its own sake.

I do remember going out at the beginning of a blizzard, late one frosty Manitoba afternoon. I was about 15 or 16. I was already in the habit of long walks by then, and I knew where I was going and how long I would be. I remember my mother being taken aback by the notion of my heading out at that moment, with the wind already starting to whip up, and the sky getting darker, and the weather forecast leaving little doubt about what we'd experience within a few hours. But she let me go. I had a delightful walk that day.

Since then, I've walked everywhere I could: mountainsides and alleyways, through parks and across plains, alongside countless creeks and through airport terminals, waiting for the next flight. There is something about the movement of my limbs that has become a comfort.

Ten years ago, in 2014, I launched a pilgrimage program through Atlantic School of Theology, where I teach. Inspired by the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Spain (although I have never been there), and countless other treks and pilgrimages around the world and throughout history, "Camino Nova Scotia" was born. The intention was to bring the gifts of pilgrimage close to home, since not everyone can go to Spain and walk for a month. I also not-very-secretly hoped that others would draw inspiration from our project and start up local pilgrimages of their own. So far, five groups have done that, which makes my heart glad.[1]

So what I have learned from walking, and from leading and speaking with other pilgrims?

First, I've learned that *the walk is not about the walk.* It sounds counterintuitive, and I suppose it is. But the desire to move, to be in motion, to swing your arms and your hips, is strangely satisfying in a world of autos (where you sit still and move forward at the same time, as Jerry Seinfeld once said), a lot of sitting at desks, and general sedentariness. Even more

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[1] I wrote about the process of developing a local pilgrimage, as well as the physical, ecological, spiritual, and theological value of pilgrimage in *Camino Close to Home: How to Plan and Thrive on Local Pilgrimages* (Toronto Novalis, 2023). I recommend this short book if you're interested in reading more about how wonderful local pilgrimages can be, or how to develop one.

deeply, the immersion in movement has the capacity to help the mind and the heart to settle, to ruminate fruitfully on questions without endless digital distractions, and to attend to God's presence in the moment. It can help to give us space to be more human and less machine-like. I worry not only about our constant conditioning to be obedient consumers in a capitalist civilization, but also about our incapacity to avoid automaton-like responses to stimuli. Email comes in; I write a reply. Commercial comes on; I decide to buy or save. Images flash on the screen; I am meant to have an emotional response. Car horn blares; I jump aside. Alarm clock goes off; I grudgingly get up. Needle shows empty; I buy more gas. Is this the thoughtful, beloved, *humane* humanity we are meant to embody? I don't think it is. But the walk—especially the long walk—helps me break away from all that, at least for a couple of hours or days. I can glimpse an alternative, however fleeting.

Second, I've learned that *God's presence in the moment is not conditional upon my readiness to seek it out.* Awareness of the holy can burst through during a long walk. I might be turning over a problem in my head or singing aloud, then be taken off guard by an inrushing feeling of the Holy Spirit. It can come, quite apart from intentionally cultivating a moment of prayer or thoughtful meditation. I certainly was taught and still believe that we can and should turn to God in any moment—Paul of Tarsus even wrote, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). But I have been surprised and pleased (and sometimes a bit disturbed) when it is the doorbell of my spirit that God rings, offering a word or feeling or insight in the middle of my walk. It's made me even more alert to the authority of God to address me. God is not merely "on call" in case I remember or feel like offering up a prayer once in a while.

Third, I've learned that *my ableism is still a barrier to my imagination and way of life.* I try to remember and think ahead about how pilgrims who use wheels, or who can't easily go outdoors, might be part of the pilgrimage experiences I've tried to offer others. But I often do a poor job of making room and seeking their input. It's made me more aware of how ableist assumptions also infiltrate church life, academic life, and indeed all of communal life. I lament my limitations at being more intuitively inclusive in this way. But that will also, I hope, enlarge my heart and help me learn from these siblings, colleagues, and friends.

Fourth, I've learned, at last, what Cree elders generously taught me and other church youth in the 1980s: *the Indigenous wisdom about belonging to the land.* When White invaders (like my ancestors) came to

this country,[2] we assumed the land could just be bought, sold, and traded like any other commodity. Many Indigenous nations rankled at this: how can land, or air, or water, be owned by anyone? If anything, they told us, we belong to the land, not the land to us. I parked that idea in my head for a long time. A long time. It made sense, sort of. But I was and am deeply conditioned by Western norms of ownership. My heart never received that wisdom. But around 2016 or 2017, after leading pilgrimages for a while and digging in deeply to the experience of extended walks (6-8 hours, 20-30 km per day), my perspective started to change. Unlike driving or flying or training or bussing, walking revealed to me that I am not just skimming the surface of the earth to get from A to B. I am in the earth and of it. Like the birds chattering above me and the juicy caterpillar inching across my path, like the trees' leaves shimmering in the sun and the breath of the wind stroking my cheek, I am in, with, and of this created order. God did not place us here to conquer and use up this planet, despite the theological errors that have led us to be exploitative and greedy toward it. God placed us *within* creation, as part of it, to love it, to be good stewards and companions of it. It took me a long, long time to learn that.

Finally, I've learned that *pilgrimage can take any form.* It might indeed be the famous 800-km journey across northern Spain, for some. It might be a week-long adventure in Nova Scotia. It might be striding or wheeling along on a sunny Saturday afternoon. It might be the difficult physical effort of getting from the car to the grocery store with a bad hip or a tired-out heart. Pilgrimage might be an inner journey along pathways of the Spirit, when movement isn't easy or possible. All of it counts. All of it matters. In the end, it is not about the distance or about the means of transport. After all, the walk isn't about the walk. It's about seeking, finding, falling away, and finding again the path toward God. It takes a lifetime, and there are no shortcuts.

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[2] Many descendants of Europeans who came to Canada in earlier centuries are fond of saying we are "settlers." But as Australian theologian and minister Chris Budden once said at a conference, "settlers don't come with an army at their backs." See Budden's *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009).

DR. MARGARET PRANG: A FEMINIST LEADER OF HER GENERATION
By Betsy Anderson

Marg Prang was a household name for me growing up in Howland House, the Student Christian Movement's (SCM) Co-op House in Toronto in the 1950s and 60s. I was pleased to finally meet her in 2010, three years before her death,[1] when I interviewed her as part of my McGeachy Scholarship research on "The Story of Howland House."

My impression as a girl was of an independent professional woman. Marg Prang was one of an impressive group of women associate general secretaries in the SCM whose early recruitment into the History faculty at the University of British Columbia (UBC) had helped create a space in academia for other women. Our interview at her Vancouver home on January 24, 2010 confirmed the boundary-breaking truth of her life, including an occasion to meet her "longtime friend and companion" Maria Furstenwald.

Margaret Prang was the oldest of four sisters. She was born January 23,1921 in Stratford, Ontario and grew up in Alberta, Ontario, and Manitoba. She attended United College in Winnipeg, now the University of Winnipeg, graduating with a BA in History in 1945. Marg was active in the local unit of the SCM, where Ted Nichols and then Ted Scott were the local unit staff. She attended the December 1943 National Council meeting as an observer from Manitoba and was elected National SCM Student Chair at the September 1944 National Council.

These were the years of the Second World War and Robert Mackie, General Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) since 1938, had moved his family and the offices of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), normally based in Geneva, Switzerland, to Toronto for the duration of the war. Other WSCF staff, including Suzanne de Dietrich and Visser t'Hooft, remained in Geneva. The proximity of WSCF staff created exciting opportunities for Marg Prang as the war drew to a close. She was a Canadian SCM delegate to the WSCF Executive Committee in New York in May of 1945, meeting for the first time since war had broken out. Held in the apartment of Reinhold and Ursuline Niebuhr at the Union Theological Seminary, Marg met many significant

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[1] 2013 Obituary in the *Vancouver Sun*.

ecumenical and international leaders, including Phillipe Maury and Hans Hoekendijk. She also met Donald Mathers, whom she invited six years later, when she was Associate General Secretary, as a keynote speaker at the SCM's Christmas Conference at Queen's University. Prang was very pleased that this introduction contributed to Mathers joining the Queen's Theological College and becoming its Principal in 1953.

Following the SCM's National Council meeting in September 1945, Marg Prang, then 24 years old, was to travel to Britain at Robert Mackie's invitation to work for the British SCM. She agreed to work in post-war London for two years as one of the three SCM staff at the London universities. Her introduction to the life of the European student movements was to have included her attendance at the World Youth Conference in London, October 29- November 10, 1945. However, she did not get an exit permit to leave Canada in time to attend. "The SCM was always under suspicion," she remembered in our 2010 interview. In the end it was also the SCM's connections that set her on her way to attending. James Gibson, an SCM member who later became President of Carleton University, was Prime Minister Mackenzie King's private secretary at the time, and arranged her exit permit.

Held days after the formation of the United Nations (October 24, 1945) with 600 young people in attendance from over sixty-three countries, the World Youth Conference was the largest ever gathering of young people. It carried their hopes and dreams for peace and a new world. It was convened by the World Youth Council, formed during World War Two to bring together the youth movements of the Allies in an anti-fascist front. The World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) was formed at the conference, with the SCM and other Canadian youth organizations part of its international membership. With the end of the war's common front alliances and the growth of the cold war, WFDY was suspected of serving the interests and being under the control of the Soviet Union. Many debates were held in the Canadian SCM during Marg's period as Associate General Secretary about whether to continue the SCM's involvement in the WFDY.

When Marg did arrive in London on a cold and rainy night in late 1945 she was accommodated at the Mary Ward Settlement House near the University of London on the edge of Bloomsbury. The living conditions were severe, she reports: rationing was still in place with destruction and scarcity all around. She recognized that part of Mackie's impetus for inviting her to work for the British SCM was the fact that she was a well-fed, untraumatized "colonial" bringing energy to the British

SCM as they were emerging from the war.[2] She may have been underestimating many of her other strengths, which Mackie no doubt recognized.

Working for the SCM at the University of London, which had many colleges, some of which had been forced to move out of London during the war, was an exciting and stimulating experience. The Senior SCM Secretary was Frank Jones, a Welsh Presbyterian minister. He lived with his family at SCM House, which served also as the headquarters for many of the programs and gatherings. She recalled that one of the speakers was Bertrand Russell, who spoke about the theory of mathematical probability. She understood very little but was thrilled to be in the presence of this "great man".

Upon her return to Canada in 1947, Prang was hired by the Canadian SCM as Associate General Secretary, working with first Gerald Hutchinson and then Jim Puxley as General Secretary. Born from the merging of the Student YM and YWCAs, the SCM had a tradition of male and female staff leadership. The General Secretary was often a married man, and the Associate General Secretary was often a single woman. Annual salaries of $3000 and $1760[3] respectively, reflected assumptions at the time about the households being supported. In a 2010 email to Douglas John Hall, Marg reflected on the impressive women who had preceded her in this role: Gertrude Rutherford, Jean Hutchinson, and Harriet Christie. "I believe that they were early feminists trying to find roles for women in the church, beyond bake sales and teaching Sunday School."[4]

These were interesting times in the SCM: the post-war campuses were full, and post-war politics were heating up. Some of these tensions emerged through the SCM's Commission on Politics and the debate about whether SCM should participate in the post-war youth conferences which spanned countries in the West and in Eastern Europe.

The arguments for participation are reflected in *The Observer's* coverage of a report by three University of Toronto students who attended the WFDY's Prague Festival in 1947. The Festival's watchword was "through international friendship and reconstruction youth builds peace."

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[2] January 24, 2010 interview of Marg Prang by Betsy Anderson, Vancouver, B.C.

[3] National Council Minutes, September 4-13, 1947, National SCM Archives at the United Church Archives.

[4] John Douglas Hall, *The Messenger: Friendship, Faith and Finding One's Way* (Eugene,OR:Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 62.

Jack Bothwell, President of the Toronto SCM, observed "there is a gap between the East and West which must somehow be bridged if we are to attain world peace. The Christian Church is the only organization which can do this."[5]

The viewpoint against participation lined up with emerging cold war politics: that connections with organizations which included participation from Eastern Europe and emerging independent former colonies, was suspect, and potentially Communist influenced or controlled. These debates took up a lot of space in the minutes and conversations of the SCM over the years that Marg was Associate General Secretary and beyond.

In our conversation, Marg observed that she was stronger on the practical, organizational side of SCM life than on the "ideas" side. Upon her return to Canada in 1947 she co-directed the SCM's Student in Industry Camp in Brantford with Frank Patterson, UBC's SCM Secretary, and then Harold Wyman. It was an international camp with Canadians, Americans and one Trinidadian, housed at a former flying field on the outskirts of Brantford. Like other SCM work camps at the time, its purpose was to enable students of all denominations to work, study and worship together while learning about factory conditions for workers and at the same time earning money for the coming school year. Marg remembered that she cooked a lot!

Opining that "they didn't know what to do with her", while Associate General Secretary, Marg was seconded several times to go and help local SCMs organize on campuses in the Maritimes and at Queens. One year it was her job to drum up interest in an SCM Spring Camp in Sussex N.B., among Maritime SCMers. George Grant was to speak but a blizzard prevented most from attending. Marg recalls that the six or seven who managed to arrive spent some of their time discussing, in light of the prospect of nuclear war, which library books should be saved and placed in the depths of the Laurentian shield so that later generations (assuming there were any) "should know what we thought was important."

Bob Miller returned from Europe in 1951 and joined the SCM National Staff as Study Secretary. As further evidence of Marg's practical nature, Miller credited her with the origins of the SCM Book Room, often associated with himself, as she spent many hours packing up book orders to send to SCMers and others across the country. These were often books published by the SCM Press in Britain.

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[5] *The Observer*, 1 December 1947:10.

In 1952 Marg decided to return to studies at the University of Toronto and undertook her MA in History under the supervision of Frank Underhill. She supported herself by accepting the position of Don at Annesley Hall, a women's residence in Victoria College. Dr. Jessie MacPherson was Dean of Women at Victoria University for over 30 years (1934-1963) and became a lifelong friend.

Jessie MacPherson was also a friend of Helen James who, along with Elizabeth Long in 1952, started the CBC's "Trans-Canada Matinee", an afternoon magazine radio programme, largely aimed at women, which interwove political discourse and current affairs, unlike most of the "soft" programming then directed at women. Jessie recommended Marg Prang as someone who could research and write material for the daily programme.

Despite having no obvious qualifications, Marg was hired in the summers while she was a graduate student to research and write a daily news commentary, four and a half minutes long. As she remembers, it was a fulltime job, staying on top of the news of the day and an excellent training in being concise and accurate.

Following her MA Marg planned to go to the Ontario College of Education and become a high school history teacher. But Frank Underhill convinced her she would be bored and encouraged her to apply for a PhD instead. To do so she had to visit the Head of the History Department and apply for one of two fellowships. Despite the Department Head's belief that women could not teach, she was successful and once again found herself following in the footsteps of only one or two women PhD students in history before her.

Marg's last summer working for the CBC coincided with a full-time teaching position at United College, Winnipeg. She worked from the Winnipeg CBC studio where a young Lloyd Robinson was TV news anchor.

She also found herself in the middle of the Crowe Case at United College. In 1958, History Professor Harry Crowe wrote a letter to a colleague, while on sabbatical, in which he expressed concern about a potential Conservative federal election victory and criticized his institution and the United Church. When Wilfred Lockhart, Principal of United College, became aware of the letter, Crowe was quickly dismissed. Twenty faculty members resigned in solidarity, including Walter Young, who had arrived to teach, four days earlier. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) investigated, and found that Crowe's dismissal was unjust. Crowe, however, was never reinstated and finished his career at York University.

This was a watershed moment for academic freedom in Canada; it galvanized the CAUT to mobilize in support of faculty and to ensure more clearly defined procedures for hiring and firing. Its aftermath strengthened academic freedom across Canada.

In 1958 Marg Prang was hired as one of ten faculty in the UBC History Department. Norman MacKenzie, one of the founders of the SCM in 1921, was the President of UBC at the time. He and Marg were well acquainted since he had been Chair of the National SCM during her tenure as Associate General Secretary. In my 2010 interview Marg observed that the SCM had a very different place in the campus of the 1940s and 1950s, where visiting SCM staff were often invited to dinner with the President. "You were accepted as part of the academic community, and it was understood that what you were doing was a good thing".[6]

Marg also reconnected with Walter Young (colleague from United College) when he joined the Political Science Department at UBC in 1962. Together they established the scholarly journal, *B.C. Studies* in 1969 which focused on and lifted up British Columbia's history in its quarterly publication. *B.C. Studies* continues its dedication to the exploration of British Columbia's cultural, economic, and political life, past and present and is credited with the increased attention to BC's history in courses, articles, and books.

When Marg came to the UBC History Department in 1958, she joined Margaret Ormsby, who was born in B.C. and a graduate of UBC with her BA (1929) and MA (1931) in history. Ormsby was a generation ahead of Marg Prang, and her route to full professor at UBC in 1955 was circuitous, following her graduation from Bryn Mawr College with a History PhD in 1936, the height of the depression.

Margaret Ormsby was a real trailblazer. When she was recruited as Department Head following F.H. Soward's precipitous resignation in 1963, she was the only woman department head in the whole university, apart from the Nursing Faculty. She proceeded to update the department with new hires, launched a PhD program and brought the department into a national and international context.[7]

Following Ormsby's retirement in 1974, when Marg Prang was nominated to follow her as department head, there were 43 history department faculty. Apparently one of her male colleagues wondered about having two women in a row as Head of the History Department.

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[6] Interview with Marg Prang, January 25, 2010.
[7] Margaret Anchoretta Ormsby - Department of History (ubc.ca) (March 7, 2024).

Another male colleague pointed out the inconsistency of his concern: "What about a man succeeding a man?"[8]

Reflecting on her time as Head of the UBC History Department (1974-79), Marg had this to say: "During my time as head I had many administrative duties outside the department, at UBC and nationally. Many of these assignments came to me because I chaired one of the largest history departments in the country, and I was female; women were still in short supply in academia."[9]

One of these national duties was her election as President of the Canadian Historical Association (1976-77), ten years after Margaret Ormsby held this position in 1965-66 and ten years before Susan Mann Trofimenkoff's presidency in 1984-85. Marg Prang's 1977 Presidential address, entitled "National Unity and the Uses of History," explored the tensions among Canadian historians between the particularity of regional and social histories and the broad generalizations of national histories that attempted to buoy up nationality unity. She observed:

> regional diversity has always been the stuff of Canadian history. Geographic distance, conflict arising from differences in economic resources and interests among regions, tension between the two founding cultures and the growth of regional cultures based on variety in historical traditions are not recent discoveries. What is new is the increasing disposition to see merit in trying to understand this diversity from the perspectives provided by study of the regions or localities themselves rather than from the centre only.[10]

Marg Prang's major book, *N.W. Rowell Ontario Nationalist*, published as a biography of Newton Wesley Rowell in 1975, had its origins in her doctoral work. In the Acknowledgements she credits Professors A.R.M. Lower and F.H. Underhill with stimulating her "interest in the relationship between Methodism and liberalism" and thanks Professor D.G. Creighton for his "sympathetic and critical direction of a thesis on aspects of Rowell's political career."[11] This comprehensive biography and

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[8] Margaret Prang - Department of History (ubc.ca) (March 7, 2024).
[9] Margaret Prang - Department of History (ubc.ca) (March 7, 2024).
[10] Margaret Prang, "National Unity and the Uses of History" 1977 Presidential Address to the Canadian Historical Association.
[11] Margaret Prang, *N.W.Rowell Ontario Nationalist* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), ix.

the entries about N.W. Rowell in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography and the Canadian Encyclopedia reflect her over-arching knowledge of and appreciation for a leader and politician who was in Harold Innis' judgment, "our greatest Canadian".[12]

Along with his many important roles, as leader of the Ontario Liberal Party, member of Borden's Union government and a Canadian delegate to the League of Nations, N.W. Rowell is known to many as the lawyer who represented the Famous Five in the Persons Case. At stake was whether women were considered persons and thus could be appointed to the Senate.　The current interpretation by successive Canadian governments of Section 24 of the British North America Act, which provided for qualified "persons" to be appointed to the Senate, meant men alone.

Judge Emily Murphy, and four other women from Alberta, the Famous Five, sought a ruling from the Canadian Supreme Court on this interpretation. Rowell represented them and despite losing at the Supreme Court in 1928 he represented them again when they took their case to the Judicial Committee of the British Privy Council, where they won a year later.

Rowell, like many of his era, had significant stature in the church as well as Canadian public life and politics. He is credited as a major lay leader in the Church Union efforts which brought the United Church into existence in 1925.　Some attempted to recruit him as a moderatorial candidate in 1932, but he declined. If elected, he would have been the first layperson to hold that position,　a　fact that did not occur until Anne Squire's election, fifty-four years later in 1986.

Marg's other major book publication was a biography of Caroline Macdonald: *A Heart at Leisure from Itself*, published by UBC Press in March 1995, more than ten years after her 1987 retirement from the History Department at UBC. Caroline Macdonald (1874-1931) was a Canadian Presbyterian missionary who spent most of her life in Japan, where she played a significant role in establishing the YWCA and in prison reform. Marg's scholarship and respect for her subject produced a fascinating biography of another boundary-breaking woman.

Completing this profile on International Day and reflecting on my discoveries about Marg Prang in the process of researching and writing it, I am struck again by the intersection of church (SCM and YWCA also), academy, media and women's friendships which helped to form her and

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[12] *N.W. Rowell Ontario Nationalist*, Book Jacket.

other leading women of her period. In all these places, women of her generation had to claim spaces normatively assumed to belong to men. They conducted their leadership, their vocations, their lives often as a minority in a setting dominated by men and with styles of work which assumed the male prerogative of unencumbered lives. Her decision at the age of 48 to adopt a daughter as a single woman (one of the first in B.C.) and her commitment to the family they created together is yet another example of her pioneering spirit.

Peter Ward, a colleague of Marg Prang's in the UBC History department had this to say about Marg: "She was one of the feminist leaders of her generation—at UBC, in the Canadian historical profession, and in the wider society of our country—and she led through example rather than rhetoric."[13]

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[13] Margaret Prang - Department of History (ubc.ca) (March 7, 2024).

Leisure Resurrected: Rekindling the Fire of Early Christian Communities
> **Jeffrey Paul Crittenden: Pickwick Publications, 2023. Pp. xiii+168.**

Crittenden, an ordained United Church minister, offers readers a renewed Christian understanding of leisure. A forward by Rowan Williams and an introduction by Walter Brueggemann are the first clues that *Leisure Resurrected* contributes to a timely theology of leisure. Crittenden's book explores how the early church changed Jewish, Greek, and Roman understandings of leisure. Crittenden resurrects that early church innovation for today, offering a Christian view of leisure to liberate people from empire-serving systems of leisure.

Contemporary scholars view leisure as discretionary time, free time, and personal experience. Our culture sees leisure as freedom from external pressures, and freedom for internal drives to experience pleasure and meaning. Leisure is often confused with recreation, when we use non-work time to catch up with chores and rest before returning to work. Crittenden laments: "Sadly, the high and noble calling of classical leisure is lost, waiting to be reclaimed and rejuvenated" (3).

Crittenden draws on his expertise in leisure studies to pose questions about Christianity and leisure. Can early church writings inform a Christian understanding of leisure today? How does this Christian understanding differ from Greek *schole*, and Roman *otium*? How does the Lord's Day differ from Jewish Sabbath?

Opening chapters unpack Greek and Roman understandings of leisure: Greek *schole* as contemplation, freedom, and virtue; Roman *otium* as recreation, a break or distraction from work, and rejuvenation. A chapter on Jewish Sabbath sets up the distinguishing features of the early church's understanding of leisure, influenced by Jewish Sabbath, but reimagined to fulfillment, joy, and service to others.

However, Christianity's elevation to state religion beginning with Constantine entrenched a divide between the Lord's Day (Sunday) and Jewish Sabbath (Saturday). The Church's concern to regulate non-work time evolved to strictures on idleness, fleshly pleasures, and virtuous spirituality. In the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, concern about non-work time's interior and exterior passions fueled the so-called Protestant work ethic.

The book's strength is Crittenden's clear and simple claim. Christian worship is a release from human preoccupation—an invitation to be fully human—and the structure of worship as a day, meal, and action

ensures "everyone could participate regardless of gender, class, age, status, or ability" (55). Christianity recast Greek *schole* as "contemplation, virtue, and joy in the experience of Jesus Christ" and Roman *otium* as "public service (e.g., caring for the sick, the poor, and the outcast) and private service (e.g., worship, the Eucharist, singing, and prayer)" (55).

A chapter on the Holy Spirit reinforces the radical view that leisure as healing is "available for all people without monetary cost" (64). Crittenden's reclaimed theology of leisure has eschatological implications. Christian leisure for the oppressed reactivates a future and purpose and includes a call to extend that leisure to others who are oppressed (i.e., preoccupied). We become concerned with how culture views the leisure economy (e.g., fun): do other leisure economies recognize the oppressed as candidates for fulfillment?

Like many academic dissertations rewritten for non-academic audiences, the book retains a historical-critical structure. Contemporary anecdotes helpful for readers to imagine leisure theory in their context are relegated to a concluding chapter on practical application in a post-COVID world. However, the book offers direction to congregational leaders searching for a message that drives parishioners to community engagement and attracts a population overworked with business and busy-work.

Specifically, Crittenden's resurrection of a Christian theology of leisure reveals our opportunities for Gospel conversations in a secular society. We encounter people trapped in leisure habits designed to serve the empire and its economy. Leisure is reduced to escapism between ubiquitous work and household demands. Our culture's systems of work and leisure eclipse time spent working for the common good. Against this oppressive economy and its enabling leisure system, we can point to a disruptive, alternative leisure.

Crittenden reminds us that Christian communities offer "a redefined participatory leisure experience" (143). We gather for a common meal and worship, in a community of equals, remembering the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our discipleship imitates and follows Jesus into the larger community, using our leisure to serve others. The leisure we experience—this disruptive alternative to empire—is "God's leisure of peace, justice, compassion, joy, and above all, grace" (143).

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The Untied Church of Canada: Unfettered for 2025 Celebrations
by Brian Arthur Brown. Woodlake Publishing, Kelowna BC, 2024

Once upon a time, about fifteen years ago, the eminent sociologist of religion, Prof. Reginald Bibby was addressing the Governing Board of The Canadian Council on his findings on the state of organized religion in Canada. Prof. Bibby has invested a lifetime in becoming the barometer of religious observance and practice from coast-coast-coast. After decades of doom-saying, the Board was taken aback when Professor Bibby declared, "religion in Canada was doing just fine." Then came the caveat directed primarily at me: "Well, maybe not yours." That is The United Church of Canada (UCC).

 A droll fellow, our Reg. At the time, it seemed no one could challenge him. In the 'oughts' of this still infant century, it was easily demonstrable that the UCC was aging badly: old, WASP, bureaucratically burdened, and fiscally frail.

But Reg was missing the mark. As ever in life, one must ask the best questions to evoke the best answers.

The question for the UCC at the close of the 20th century, and the dawn of the 21st was not, "Is the UCC dying?" Rather it should have been, "What is the UCC becoming?" The former connotes both the empirical and the existential; the latter appropriately, the theological.

 On June 10th, 2025, the UCC will mark, and yes, celebrate her 100th anniversary. (Not to mention the long and distinguished narratives of her founding denominations). And thanks to the Rev. Dr. Brian Brown's newest book, an astonishing number of UCC members, and Canadians in general, are falling in love with the UCC again. Brown and his myriad collaborators have produced not so much 'a souvenir volume', but rather an '*avenir* adventure': a detailed dip into the future.

Conjoined with its precursor and companion volume, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, *The Untied Church* is a testimony to the butterfly of the Spirit emerging from its rather shabby, even tattered chrysalis of the past three decades.

Be advised, Brown sees the past, present, and future through Ralph Milton's 'rose coloured bifocals.' Through Brown's diligent research and elegantly structured prose, enhanced by vivid illustrations, we see the UCC at the beginning of her second century as something of renewed beauty for God. Mother Theresa would love it.

The UCC is not, nor will it be, the church I and millions of Canadians have known and loved. How could it be? Who, in quiet honest

moments would even want it to be. Yes, the UCC has changed. We are changed. So is the country from which she sprang. Our immediate world, the planet itself has changed. The world is multilingual, multiethnic, multicultural, multigenerational, multigender, multifaith and multidimensional. In this world, Moderator Carmen Lansdowne notes, "Our church is currently working to be a place of deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice." From her lips to God's ears . . .

And we will, as ever, often get things wrong. We will be, like the beloved carol, 'sometimes sorrowing, sometimes sighing, sometimes bleeding, sometimes, it seems, almost dying.' So was Jesus himself.

Fresh winds are rising. The UCC is showing tangible proof of that. The UCRD website shows *The Untied Church* as its current bestseller. In the wake of its publication, local anniversary services are being planned in some 250 clusters in every city, most towns, rural and First Nation communities. A national gathering, focused in historic Église St. James United in Montreal featuring emerging stories of faith from francophone, Indigenous, African, and Asian immigrant communities whose narratives are bringing the world to the UCC, and the UCC to the world. Not too shabby for a denomination only 100 years young.

It all reminds me of the words of hymnist, Natalie Sleeth:

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future, what it holds a mystery,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

Rev. Dr. James Christie
Professor Emeritus, The University of Winnipeg
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Hope, Peace, Unrest: The Holy Spirit in the Korean Community in The United Church of Canada.
by Don Schweitzer and OhWang Kwon. Gyeonggi-do: IYAGI Publishing & Design, 2023. 176 Pp.

As stated in the foreword, this is the fifth book in the book series, An Intercultural Adventure, which has been published biennially. It was featured in the seminar held at the Edmonton Korean United Church on October 17-19, 2022, and published as a book the following year.

The book comprises five chapters. In the Introduction, the Holy Spirit, the third "person" of the Trinity, is portrayed as the love and joy of God. The Holy Spirit is described as multifaceted, serving as a source of hope, peace, and unrest within the Korean community in The United Church of Canada.

In the next three chapters, each mode is explored within its context. These main chapters unravel a complex theological subject across three dimensions: the Holy Spirit, The United Church of Canada, and the Korean community. They offer a profound and nuanced perspective on understanding Koreans living in Canada as migrants, particularly within the context of a racialized community, as they strive to navigate their future guided by the Spirit.

Koreans in the United Church inherit diverse interpretations of the Holy Spirit from both their Korean Protestant heritage and the United Church's tradition. Through their experiences, worship, and study, they develop a unique understanding. This understanding empowers them to embrace liminal possibilities, pursue diversity and harmony, and work towards a future characterized by hope, peace, and unrest in an intercultural church and society.

Korean Protestant traditions deeply integrate the Holy Spirit, reflecting impactful movements and revivals that place the Spirit at the core of their faith. These traditions stem from experiences of social change and cultural heritage, with theologians offering diverse insights on the Spirit's role in collective action, church practices, and cultural expressions.

The Holy Spirit's diverse presence is apparent in its operation through various communities and societal aspects, as exemplified by the focus of individuals such as Suh Nam-dong (1918-84), Cho Yonggi (1936-2021), and Ryu Tong-Shik (1922-2022) on justice struggles, church ministries, and Korean culture, respectively. Understanding this diversity challenges Koreans in the United Church to embrace various modes of the

Spirit's work, promoting both freedom to express cultural heritage and openness to the Spirit's activities across cultural groups and society at large.

The understanding of the Holy Spirit can be traced back to Acts 2, where the outpouring of the Spirit led to the formation of the early Christian community through charismatic leadership and communal bonds. In the Hebrew Bible, the Holy Spirit is viewed as the fundamental force of life, bringing hope for renewal and the defeat of evil. Within the Korean community in the United Church, the Spirit operates through traditional practices and charismatic leadership, promoting continuity with Korean heritage while adapting to new challenges in Canadian society.

The Holy Spirit, as the giver of life, grants gifts like love, hope, and courage, empowering the church and society for transformation. Received through faith in Christ, the Spirit brings peace, offering assurance amid life's challenges and inspiring joy rooted in Christ's resurrection. This peace affirms belonging and acceptance, enabling celebration despite marginalization. Through hope and the Spirit's peace, joy arises, acknowledging suffering while rejoicing in Christ's victory over death.

The Holy Spirit manifests in diverse forms, offering hope, peace, and inciting unrest against injustice and suffering. The book admirably spotlights Arirang cultural tradition. Arirang, a secular song in Korean culture, embodies this unrest, expressing grief and defiance against oppression. Originating over six centuries ago, Arirang serves as a medium for the Spirit's protest and yearning, reflecting both collective sorrow and resilience while envisioning a hopeful future for Koreans, even in diaspora. When people hear these Arirang sung, they hear the Spirit speaking to them. I would have liked to see specific Arirang verses in the book. These examples could have directly connected readers with the lyrical and emotional aspects of Arirang, offering a clearer and more tangible link between Korean spirituality and the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the book, including a small section on Arirang, the authors' deep sense of empathy and affection for the Korean community in The United Church of Canada is evident. It's not from a detached standpoint, but an engaged and heartfelt point of view. This genuine connection is obvious in the way the book addresses issues of suffering, injustice, and oppression.

This book is available in both English and Korean languages. I would recommend this book not only to those interested in understanding the Holy Spirit in relation to the Korean community in The United Church of Canada, but also to individuals or groups interested in exploring

interculturalism in a church. It is suitable for a book study, for a small group gathering in a church or in an academic setting in both languages.

Rev. Dr. Nam Ok Yoo,
Burnaby, BC.