

Touchstone

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Gospel meets Culture: Newbiggin's Question

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Editorial

What an honour to succeed Peter Wyatt as Editor of *Touchstone*. And what big shoes to fill! Under Peter's leadership, and that of Mac Watts before him, *Touchstone* has provided a much-needed forum for theological conversation within The United Church of Canada. I hope that I can carry on their legacy and I thank the *Touchstone* Board for placing their confidence in me.

A bit about me: I was raised in the United Church, ordained by Hamilton Conference on a blistering hot night in 1981, and I have served four pastoral charges, all in Ontario. In 2014 I left First Grantham United Church in St. Catharines and became a full-time staff person for Waterloo Presbytery. When Presbyteries disappeared in 2018, so did my job. It was a good time to retire. Since then I have confirmed the words uttered by so many retirees: "I don't know how I ever found time to work!"

I received a B.A. in History from York University, an M. Div. from Emmanuel College and a Ph. D. in Religious Studies from McMaster University. I am reminded that Jesus commanded us to love the Lord our God with our *minds*. The articulation of a coherent Trinitarian, Christocentric, biblical theology for each age is the church's great challenge and blessing. The editorship of *Touchstone* will enable me to honour that command in the company of so many thoughtful and faithful contributors.

1992 was a memorable year for me. Not only did the Blue Jays win their first World Series, in 1992 the Ontario Government passed the Retail Businesses Holidays Act, effectively removing all legal barriers to businesses opening on Sundays. Shortly after, the Norwich (Ontario) Figure Skating Club moved their prime instructional time from afternoon and early evening to Sunday morning.

The combined impact of these two events on the church was swift and dramatic. Our thriving Sunday School lost half of its children. Church attendance began to decline. I realized that the church was up against powerful currents of cultural change and could no longer count on governments, businesses or schools to protect it from competing claims on people's loyalty and commitment.

Of course, the new law was a symptom, not a cause. A massive social shift was taking place and the church was swept along with it. Gone were the days when simple actions such as having more relevant sermons, offering snappier music, or creating the most exciting mid-week groups encouraged people to come to church.

Around the same time, I discovered the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin returned to his native England after four decades in India to discover that the "Christian" country he had left as a young man

no longer existed. His own culture was now the mission field. And he asked a very simple question: “What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the Gospel and modern Western culture?” That question has shaped my ministry. Not that I have been able to answer it in any really effective way. But I realized that I had been trained to tend and maintain a form of church whose time was passing. Ministry was going to involve challenges for which I was not prepared.

I believe that, forty years later, Newbigin’s question remains one of the key challenges the western church needs to face. I decided to make it the theme for my first issue as editor.

Six people also agreed to contribute to the discussion. I simply asked them to engage with the question, each from a different perspective. They did not disappoint.

Ross Lockhart, Dean of St. Andrew’s Hall in Vancouver, B. C., has provided an excellent overview of Lesslie Newbigin’s work and legacy. For those not familiar with Newbigin, Ross shows how Newbigin’s experience in a different culture informed his analysis of the Western fact-based “plausibility structure.” A missional encounter between the Gospel and modern Western culture, Newbigin argued, will be at least in part a collision between rival ways of making sense of the world and talking about what is true. Ross shows how the Western church’s alliance with the assumptions of modernity have left us ill-prepared to engage critically with our culture.

I discuss Newbigin’s question from the perspective of ecclesiology. What kind of church would a missionary encounter with our culture require? I explore one aspect of Newbigin’s ecclesiology—his exegesis of the word *ekklesia*. Like the New Testament churches, missional churches today are gathered communities, determined by two realities: the living presence of God in Christ and the specifics of the place where the gathered community is located. The specific form and style those communities take will be diverse and varied because they are not maintaining a cultural tradition but responding to the presence and activity of God in a particular place.

Christy Foldenauer is a Baptist pastor in Midlothian, Virginia. She came to ministry with a degree in communication and a career in financial services. The focus of her ministry has been on the formation of disciples, especially those who are newer to faith. She argues that, in a largely post-Christian context, it is essential to begin with people’s experience of Christ in their lives and to develop language that enables them to articulate and live into that experience. Key to this process is the dismantling of some powerful inherited cultural assumptions and “false

narratives.”

Aaron Miller, minister of University Hill United Church in Vancouver, engages Newbigin’s question from the perspective of vocation. The narrative of many older church members is one of bewilderment and loss. Aaron reminds us that there is a generation of leaders who do not have personal memories of the “glory days” of overflowing and influential churches. In our present context, ministry must combine a grounding in the traditions of the faith with a nimble, adaptable, entrepreneurial spirit. Faith that leads to vocation does not mean inheriting a set of cultural norms and habits but discerning where God is active. Missional vocation regards the present situation of change and disruption as a cause for hope and excitement.

Linda Yates, in “Speaking Foolishness to the Geeks” [not a typo] reminds us how the implications of Newbigin’s question itself have changed over forty years. In Newbigin’s mind, the main challenge to the Gospel was the modern privileging of an understanding of truth as scientifically demonstrable fact and the relegation of questions of meaning and purpose to the realm of private belief. Linda notes that, in a way that Newbigin could scarcely have anticipated, science-based understanding of truth is being thrown into doubt in the face of a growing “plausibility structure of the Unreal.” Engagement with culture may mean reaffirming that God encompasses all reality, including that which can be revealed through scientific enquiry.

Missional engagement requires fresh understandings of church and Christian community. A young student minister recently asked me how I thought the church had changed in the last forty years. I replied that I wasn’t sure it had. Our culture has changed dramatically and the church had found itself reacting to those changes. But the basic template of mainline church life is fundamentally the same as in the 1960s.

And so we’ve invited Ingrid Brown to tell the delightful story of “Weird Church,” a new community born out of the demise of an historic United Church. “From The Heart” offers an example of what a creative missional response to contemporary culture looks like in one setting.

I trust that you, our reader, will be inspired by these contributions to reflect personally on Lesslie Newbigin’s question: What would an encounter between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and our culture look like?

Paul Miller

FROM INSTITUTION TO EXPEDITION: EXPLORING LESSLIE NEWBIGIN’S IMPACT ON GOSPEL AND CULTURE

By Ross Lockhart

“Did I ever tell you about meeting Lesslie Newbigin near the end of his life?” asked Darrell Guder, my colleague and senior fellow in The Centre for Missional Leadership at St. Andrew’s Hall, as we drove along the Trans-Canada Highway to speak at a church conference in the interior of British Columbia. “No,” I replied eagerly, “tell me more.” Darrell was aware that I was soon leaving for Arusha, Tanzania as a denominational representative for the 14th Commission on World Mission and Evangelism meeting in 2018. He reflected on his attendance at the 12th Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in 1996 held in Salvador Bahia, Brazil. Darrell explained that Newbigin was invited because he was the Secretary of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism when it was founded in the 1960’s as an outcome of the merger he helped orchestrate between the World Council and the International Missionary Council. Newbigin had no official role at the conference and while an honoured guest from an earlier generation, Darrell felt that in practice he was treated more as a marginal figure by those organizing the conference. Newbigin, the legendary missionary icon was in the last two years of his life, blind and increasingly in need of assistance. Darrell recalled that, when it was discovered by the missionary community gathered at the meeting in Brazil, especially those from the global south, that Lesslie Newbigin was with them and had not even been asked to speak, it did not sit well with leaders from around the world.

As a result of that agitation, organizers hastily scheduled a twenty minute time period for Newbigin to address the conference during an afternoon break. The room was packed, and the diverse crowd leaned in to hear Newbigin speak, scribbling notes and soaking up his wisdom. Time ran out, Darrell recalled, and organizers had to cut Newbigin short. Geoffrey Wainwright later wrote that at the close of the first session, “when the moderator slipped [Newbigin] a note to say that his time was up, his failing eyesight prevented him—much to the delight of the assembly—from immediately getting the message.”¹ But due to the high demand, they scheduled a second time and he gave an important lecture that was later published—although he was blind and was speaking

¹ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Signs Amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), xiii.

without a note. This lecture was later remembered as his swan song on the ecumenical stage. Hearing Darrell's story of encounter with Lesslie Newbigin and heeding his advice, I kept my eyes wide open later that year in Arusha (and ever since) for the unexpected surprises of God's missionary people gathered and scattered, saved to be sent.

So, who is Lesslie Newbigin, who over twenty years after his death continues to be a key figure in missional ecclesiology, attracting attention within church and academy, furthering scholarship and generating resources for local churches on mission, and inspiring journals like *Touchstone*? Indeed, any historiography of the missional church movement must take seriously the sources and impact of Newbigin's life (1909-1998) that roughly spanned the period between the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 and the publication of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* at the end of the 20th Century.

English born, Church of Scotland missionary, Lesslie Newbigin's life provides essential insight into the evolution of Christian thought and practice regarding church and mission in the 20th century. Newbigin's missionary work in India, beginning in 1936, included leadership in first the International Missionary Council and later the integration with the World Council of Church's Mission and Evangelism department that he led until his return to a highly secularized United Kingdom in 1974. Newbigin's application of his "missionary skillset" to what he considered a "neo-pagan Britain" as a pastor in the Reformed Church and missiologist at Selly Oak College in Birmingham, helped further the conversation that laid the groundwork for missional theology today. Newbigin has been described as possessing a bi-cultural missional theology, shaped "as much by India as by his British roots" and remains "an especially important mentor for missional theology in the west."² Newbigin's writings consistently noted that the era after Emperor Constantine's support of the Christian religion in the 4th century meant that Christianity ceased to understand itself as a missionary community.³

Newbigin's mission experience in India, ecumenical founding of the indigenous Church of South India and extensive work with the World Council of Churches, eventually led him back to Britain and a return to

² Darrell Guder, "From Mission and Theology to Missional Theology," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Volume XXIV, No. 1, 2003, 51.

³ Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, *The Distinctive Identity of the Church: A Constructive Study of the Post-Christendom Theologies of Lesslie Newbigin and John Howard Yoder*. (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015), 30.

the United Reformed Church roots of his upbringing. His shock at the extensive secularization of Great Britain during his time on the mission field (that he thought of in terms of “neo-paganism”) led him to apply his missionary skill set to the increasingly secular West. He wrote, “there seemed to be so much timidity in commending the Gospel to the unconverted people of Britain,” naming specifically the “modern scientific worldview” and the challenge of religious education in an increasingly pluralistic and multi-faith society.⁴

Undaunted by this new contextual challenge, Newbigin engaged the secular West of his homeland through significant publications such as *The Other Side of 1984*, *Foolishness to the Greeks* and *The Open Secret*. Newbigin’s writings and his leadership within The United Reformed Church in Britain (including a term as Moderator of the General Assembly) served as a catalyst for conversation on mission in the 1980s in what became known as the Gospel and our Culture (GOC) programme. As Craig Van Gelder notes, emerging from these conversations of the GOC, Newbigin echoed Karl Barth’s emphasis on the doctrine of election as crucial for the understanding of the church in connection with God’s mission. Highlighting the biblical record of God’s call to Abraham in Genesis 12, the church is not called as a privileged and exclusive society, but rather the church is *blessed to be a blessing*. Like an older sibling handed an allowance to share with younger sisters and brothers, the church becomes the “hermeneutic of the gospel” and exists as a *sign* of God’s redemptive reign, a *foretaste* of the eschatological hope that is promised in the gospel, and an *instrument* of the Holy Spirit to bring about the redemptive reign of God in the world.⁵

Newbigin’s writings alongside the conversations he fostered with other missiologists and concerned leaders in church and academy through the GOC, did not go unnoticed in North America. In fact, for a growing number of scholars and Christian leaders there was an awareness of the need to engage the GOC’s call for an integration between the disciplines of missiology and ecclesiology in order to construct a post-Christendom missiological ecclesiology for Christian witness in an increasingly secular West. Early evidence of the GOC impact on North American theology began in the mid-1980s when the Overseas Ministries Study

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography*. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1993), 230-231.

⁵ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Perspective Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 38. For Newbigin’s use of sign, foretaste and instrument see *The Open Secret*, 110.

Center hosted several consultations in the wake of Lesslie Newbigin's 1984 Warfield lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. Newbigin's lecture was later published as *Foolishness to the Greeks* and challenged the North American audience of scholars and ministry practitioners to consider whether the West could be converted from its growing secularity with his central question, "What would be involved in a genuine missionary encounter between the gospel and the culture which is shared by the peoples of Europe and North America and their colonial and cultural offshoots, the growing company of educated leaders in all the cities of the world, the culture with which those of us who share in it usually describe as modern?"⁶

Newbigin noted that while gospel and culture had been studied in depth by scholars such as Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, they approached the subject from the perspective of theologians and lacked the "experience of the cultural frontier, of seeking to transmit the gospel from one culture to a radically different one."⁷ Newbigin took seriously the impact of modernity on the West and the importance of contextualization, noting that there can never be a "culture-free gospel," rather the gospel is embodied in culturally conditioned forms calling into question the values and priorities of any current or future human expression of shared life.⁸ Newbigin's sensitivity to the way in which the gospel was translated from one culture to the other had a significant impact on a generation of scholars who followed, as Canadian missiologist Ross Hastings notes: "the challenge the Western church faces is that it is often encultured in ways that it ought not to be, and that it is not inculturating the gospel in ways it ought to be."⁹

In response to Newbigin's lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary and the conversations that emerged out of that work, the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) in North America began to

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *1984 Warfield Lectures, Princeton Theology Seminary*, <http://commons.ptsem.edu/id/04133#audio-player-container>, accessed 6 June 2020.

⁷ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1.

⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 4.

⁹ Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church*, 38. Hastings defines inculturation as the ways of adapting communication of the gospel for a specific culture being evangelized, while enculturation is a process of influence by the dominant culture upon an individual or community to imbibe its accepted norms and values so the individual or community is pressured to find acceptance within the society of that culture.

take shape through the leadership of scholars like George Hunsberger, Wilbert Shenk, Charles West, Craig Van Gelder, Darrell Guder, Jim Brownson, Alan Roxburgh and Lois Barrett.¹⁰ Western Theological Seminary, where Hunsberger was on faculty, began to host GOCN activities producing newsletters, contributing to noted journals such as *Missiology* and interpreting Newbigin's work with the GOC for the particularities of the North American context with a focus on culture, gospel and the church. This threefold area of study was further developed in the 1996 edited volume of essays by George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder entitled, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*. The favourable response to the ideas raised in the volume set the groundwork with Eerdmans publishing house for future titles in the Gospel and Our Culture Network line, including *Missional Church*.

The work on what later became *Missional Church* was made possible by a three-year grant from the Pew Charitable Trust that enabled missiologists to travel, research and convene consultations to test their theories on the work of the GOCN in North America. The largest of such gatherings took place in 1996 with a working title of "Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America" in which 250 people participated.¹¹ The grant also provided outside scholarship support and reflection from theologians Justo Gonzalez, Douglas John Hall, Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder. Together, scholars were working with Newbigin's challenge for North America, as noted earlier, presented in the 1984 Warfield and published in 1986 as *Foolishness to the Greeks* when he edited his main question from the lecture down to the more pithy, "What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the gospel and this whole way of perceiving, thinking, and living we call 'modern Western culture'?"¹² Michael Goheen notes that Newbigin's language of missionary encounter "keeps us from carving out a small space within culture into which the gospel is made to fit. And it does not allow us to think of Western culture as innocuous; it is religious at its core, shaped by idolatry and the spiritual powers."¹³

By 1998, a group of GOCN missiologists were able to deliver a manuscript for publication, edited by Darrell Guder, entitled *Missional*

¹⁰ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 46.

¹¹ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 47.

¹² Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 1.

¹³ Michael Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 203.

Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.¹⁴ By adding the suffix “al” to the word “mission,” the authors hoped to foster an understanding of the church as “fundamentally and comprehensively defined by its calling and sending, its purpose to serve God’s healing purposes for all the world as God’s witnessing people to all the world.”¹⁵ While designed for an academic audience, the book received wide spread acclaim and attention throughout the various denominations of the Christian church in North America. The book appeared to articulate what many pastoral leaders were experiencing in the practice of ministry and the need to re-orientate Christian communities towards mission in a post-Christendom landscape. It reminds us that mission is participating in what the Triune God is up to in the world as Lesslie Newbigin noted in his book *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, “The Church . . . is not so much an institution as an expedition sent to the ends of the earth in Christ’s name.”¹⁶

In the *Missional Church* project, we see Newbigin’s influence as those in the (formerly) mainline North American Protestant denominations began to pivot and see themselves as missionaries in their own neighbourhoods, where affable agnostic friends and family were no longer born “nominally Christian.” You can hear Newbigin’s cautionary words taking root, “It is easy for us who are committed to preaching of the Gospel, to forget how strange, and even repelling, the Gospel is to the ordinary common sense of the world.”¹⁷ As Newbigin reminds us in *Foolishness to the Greeks*, “If you want a definition of water, don’t ask a fish.”¹⁸ Could it be that we are now far enough out of the shadow of Christendom, that we can regain an appreciation for the early church’s “aliens and exiles” (1 Peter 2: 11 NRSV) identification apart from the

¹⁴ Other authors contributing to *Missional Church* included Lois Barrett, Inagrace Dietterich, George Hunsberger, Alan Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder.

¹⁵ Darrell Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 122. Guder argues that the authors were seeking to explore the implications of Vatican II’s ecclesiological and missiological definition in *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes* that “The church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1998).

¹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, “Context and Conversion,” *International Review of Mission* 68, no. 271 (1979): 301.

¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 21.

broader culture when it comes to Christian witness in the West? If so, this next generation of Christians will embrace more fully Newbigin's call for "men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become corporately a sign, instrument and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, all nations, and all human lives."¹⁹ Whatever that looks like, whatever the next, most faithful step might be for the Church in North America, Lesslie Newbigin's wisdom and enduring question of a genuine missionary encounter with the West will be a trustworthy and necessary guide.

¹⁹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 124.

ECCLESIOLOGY FOR A MISSIONARY SITUATION

by Paul Miller

Late in his life, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin had a pointed message for Christians in Europe and North America: “Where your churches are located is the new mission field.” Thirty years after Newbigin’s death, this message is more pertinent than ever. Churches that used to send missionaries to convert the world now live among people, who, if they are going to hear the Gospel, will be hearing it for the first time. They must relearn to be missionaries—to people outside their front doors.

This insight has profound *ecclesiological* implications. It goes beyond slicker marketing and more attractive programming to the very essence and purpose of the church. What does it mean to be the church in this new missionary situation?¹

The New Testament churches, Newbigin argues, were determined by two realities: “one, God, God in Christ; the other, the place where the Church is.”² God in Christ. Location. Clarity about these two ecclesiological foundations is essential if there is to be a genuine “encounter between the Gospel and modern Western culture.”³

Ecclesiology follows Christology

Ecclesiology is the Church’s thinking and speaking about itself; but ecclesiology is a secondary discipline, dependent on theology and Christology. As Jürgen Moltmann puts it, “The church has its true being in the work of Christ. That excludes any independent ontology of the church.”⁴

The Christological basis of ecclesiology is captured nicely by a

¹ For a full treatment of Newbigin’s “missional ecclesiology”, see Michael Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

² Lesslie Newbigin, “On Being the Church for the World” (1988) in Paul Weston, ed., *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 132.

³ *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). The main impact of “modern Western culture” on the church is epistemological, resulting in the redefinition of knowledge as empirically provable fact and the banishment of faith from the public to the purely private realm. Newbigin explicates this view in many of his writings, most notably in *Foolishness to the Greeks* and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Margaret Kohl, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 69.

classic study in which Paul S. Minear explores ninety-six different New Testament images for the Church. When the New Testament writers used these images drawn from everyday life and the storehouse of scriptural memory to describe the church, they invested them with powerful new meaning. Minear notes the freedom with which New Testament writers combined and recombined them in inventive and imaginative ways. The church is the people of God, a new creation, a fellowship of faith, the Body of Christ; it is salt, boat, bread, branches, bride; it is vineyard, priests, royalty, exiles, the poor, ambassadors, hosts, guests. In a single chapter, 1 Corinthians 3, St. Paul compares the church to both a farmer and a field, both a builder and a building, both a labourer and a servant. The images themselves do not have self-contained meaning, nor do they correspond to fixed characteristics of the church, Minear argues.⁵ They are meaningful only as they connect the Church to the risen Christ. Hence, their remarkable linguistic fluidity.

That ecclesiology depends on Christology seems self-evident. However, since the days of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, the Church has been described more and more in sociological terms. “Church” questions are questions of form, function, organization, and above all relevance to the modern age.

Catholic writer Joseph Bottum argues that sociology of religion can tend to make religion something other than it really is by bracketing the core beliefs that “bind” (*religare*) people to it and by over-emphasizing non-religious concepts like “community” or “social utility”⁶ In a missionary situation, the church must remember above all *why* it exists—to be the Body of Christ, receiving its life from Christ, sent to continue the work of Christ until he returns. The foundational ecclesiological text is John 20:21: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”⁷

This “sent” (*missio*) nature of mission means that it is never abstract or purely theoretical. Mission is concretized in time and space. Jesus’ proclamation is closely tied to a specific context—the towns and

⁵ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (1960) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) Kindle edition, loc 4241.

⁶⁶ Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age* (New York: Image, 2014), 49. For precisely the opposite argument—a sociological critique of “theological reductionism”—see Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 2-7.

⁷ “On Being the Church for the World,” 134.

villages of Galilee.⁸ The church is not founded on a religious idea but on the historical narratives of Israel, Jesus, and the first Christians. But the mission continues to be lived out in the historical specificities of the church's context.

Renewal often occurs when ancient tradition is rediscovered and reimagined for a new time and place. A missionary situation requires a fresh understanding of the word *ekklesia*, the most frequently used New Testament term for the church. Newbigin was by no means the first to re-emphasize this concept. Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz notes the importance of *ekklesia* to the 16th and 17th century Radical Reformers who rebelled against inherited understandings of Scripture and doctrine, but also against the parish form of the church. Common to both the Roman Catholic and Reformed/Lutheran streams, the local parish automatically encompassed all who lived within a specific geographic location. In contrast, the Radical Reformation defined the church as "a spiritual people gathered out of the wider society."⁹

For all their differences, however, all Reformation ecclesiologies shared this in common: a culture in which virtually everyone was Christian. In this context, to be an *ekklesia* is to be "called and gathered out of the world."¹⁰ In a modern Western missionary situation, Newbigin argues, the opposite is called for. *Ekklesia* must mean those who are called together in order to scatter *for the sake of the world*. A missionary context requires *missional ekklesiae*.

Newbigin's exegesis of *ekklesia* reminds us that it was originally not a religious word. In the first century, there were many terms ready to hand for religious societies and gatherings.¹¹ Instead, the early church chose "the secular word for the assembly of all citizens . . . in which the business of the city is dealt with" to describe itself.¹² This is more than

⁸ For a fascinating study of the way in which the geographical location of Galilee shapes the narratives of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels, see Sean Freyn, *Jesus, Galilee and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, Ltd., 1988).

⁹ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 469.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

¹¹ Among these were *thiasos*, *eranos*, *koinon*, *synodos*, in addition to the Hellenistic Jewish term *synogoge*. See Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 54-55.

¹² "On Being the Church for the World," 132. So, for example, the gathering of the citizenry in Ephesus narrated in Acts 19 (which turned into an angry mob) is an *ekklesia*.

mere semantics, Newbigin argues. It suggests that God intends the church's mission to be fundamentally shaped by "secular reality, and not the internal needs of the church." The church is "the church of God for that place."¹³ Not to be confused with "letting the world set the church's agenda," (as they used to say in the 60s and 70s),¹⁴ *ekklesia* implies a Christological understanding of context as the place where Christ is at work, inviting the Church to join with him.¹⁵

The clear focus of Newbigin's missional ecclesiology, then, is the local, assembled community. While various denominational and connexional structures are likely to persist for the foreseeable future, in a missionary situation the primary instrument of mission—and the only "hermeneutic of the Gospel—is a congregation of men and women who believe in it and live by it."¹⁶

With Newbigin's insights as a starting point, we ask: what would a missional *ekklesia* look like in practice? In one sense, it is hard to say because missional *ekklēsiae*, by definition, are locally responsive to the Spirit's moving. But they are all branches of the same vine, Jesus Christ, so they will share certain fundamental qualities.

Culturally Aware — Counter Cultural

Missional *ekklēsiae* are at the same time deeply acquainted with and take a critical stance towards their own culture. This suggests that mission in our context is by definition "cross-cultural." The missionary's first task is to "learn the language." Missional *ekklēsiae* must know their own secular, post-Christian culture intimately. Alan Roxburgh, who has spent thirty years interpreting Newbigin's insights to North American churches, says the first step is learning to listen with fresh ears, both to God in Scripture and to the church's own "neighbourhood."¹⁷ It is surprising how little many congregations know about their immediate neighbours. "We want to attract younger families," they say. But they know very little about the hopes, dreams, struggles, questions, spiritual longings of the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 30.

¹⁵ "On Being the Church for the World."

¹⁶ "The Congregation as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel" in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222-233.

¹⁷ Alan Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 56-73.

young families they hope to reach. “So many new houses are being built. Why don’t those people come to our church?” they lament. But when asked, “Do you know who lives in those houses, where they come from, where they work, how they spend their time?” they have no idea. Learning how to “listen” to the church’s “neighbourhood” means initially setting aside anxiety about how to entice people to come to church and being prayerfully open to what God might be “up to” in that neighbourhood.¹⁸

The second missionary task is to announce the claims of Jesus Christ who *calls all cultures into question*.¹⁹ Western churches have long assumed the inherent convergence of Christianity and culture. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas recall growing up in a world where “Church, home and state formed a . . . consortium that worked together to instill ‘Christian values.’”²⁰ While embedded in culture, however, the missional *ekklesia* can never be co-opted by culture because it proclaims the culturally disruptive message of the Gospel.

The life of a missional *ekklesia* will consist of familiar practices—worship, preaching, Bible study, pastoral care, community service. However, the motivational focus of these practices will shift. Many long-standing habits and “defaults”²¹ will be abandoned. At the same time, other taken-for-granted, seemingly innocuous characteristics will take on a deeper and unexpected significance. For example, in a culture marked by isolation, alienation and “epidemic” loneliness, simply covenanting to meet together weekly will be a powerfully counter-cultural act.

But above all, 21st century missional *ekklisiae* will be communities of *grace*. We live in a time that seems both infinitely permissive and profoundly judgmental and graceless. We have held on to a religious sense of moral outrage at injustice but have lost the hope of redemption.²² *New York Times* columnist Elizabeth Bruenig recently wrote that the mood of our times “demands constant atonement but disdains the very idea of forgiveness.”²³ A criminal record can result in life-long unemployability. An opinion deemed controversial or offensive can end friendships or a career. Thanks to the internet, past mistakes can live forever. There is a need for the counter-cultural witness of Christian communities that are fearlessly realistic about human brokenness and

¹⁸ Ibid., 24ff.

¹⁹ *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 4.

²⁰ *Resident Aliens*, 16.

²¹ Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 24-37.

corruption while at the same time steadfastly believing that no sin or shortcoming is beyond the reach of the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ.

Sign, Witness, and Foretaste

The biblical image for the church with the greatest staying power is the Body of Christ. It suggests an interdependent family, sharing one another's joys and sorrows. It is the hands, feet, and heart of Jesus. But this image is often filtered through a lens of therapeutic individualism which portrays the church's core business as catering to the social, spiritual and emotional needs of its adherents. It must be remembered, though, that it is the Body of *Christ*, the physical form in which the risen Christ chooses to be present in the world. Missional *ekklesiae* are gathered as the Body, but that Body is sent out (*missio*) on Christ's behalf.

In addition to caring for its members, a missional *ekklesia* is called to be a "sign, instrument and foretaste of God's reign in that 'place' [where it is located]." ²⁴ (Or, as Alan Roxburgh puts it, "sign, witness and foretaste". ²⁵) Each of these words invites explication.

First, *signs*. A sign points beyond itself to a greater reality. Its meaning comes from that which it signifies. As St. Ambrose said, "the church is like the moon, which has no light of its own or for itself." ²⁶ Missional *ekklesiae* point beyond themselves to the promised reign of reconciliation, justice, peace and hope that the Trinitarian God inaugurates and sends the church to live out and proclaim. Missional *ekklesiae* are human organizations, requiring institutional tools like gathering places, budgets, programs and trained leaders; but always as means, never as ends. Insofar as they care for the needs of one another, they will do so for the sake of this mission. Insofar as they strive to attract new members, it will be so that Christ's reach may be extended in

²² See, for example, Ross Douthat, "The Religious Roots of a New Progressive Era," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/opinion/protestant-progressive-reformation.html>; Alexander Beiner, "Sleeping Woke: Cancel Culture and Simulated Religion," <https://medium.com/rebel-wisdom/sleeping-woke-cancel-culture-and-simulated-religion-5f96af2cc107>.

²³ Twitter, @ebruenig, June 19, 2020.

²⁴ "On Being the Church for the World," 138.

^{25,26} Alan J. Roxburgh, Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping the Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

the place where the church is.

Second, missional *ekklesiae* will be “witnesses”—*martures* in Greek, (from which we get the English word “martyr”), which originally meant someone who testifies to the truth, not necessarily someone who dies for a cause. Even in a low-risk environment like Canada or the U.S. there will be a cost to the church’s witness. As Newbigin writes, “[T]he Church will be recognizable as the bearer of [the] mission on which the Father has sent the Son and on which the Son has sent the Church, in so far as the scars of his Passion are recognizable in its body.”²⁷ Faithful missional *ekklesiae* can expect their witness to come at a price, perhaps as a consequence of standing in solidarity with the marginalized or speaking Gospel truth to power. It may come simply from a willingness to share the burdens of their neighbours. More than the benevolent dispenser of charity to the needy,²⁸ witnessing *ekklesiae* will be the Body of Christ who rose with the wounds of his suffering intact.

Lesslie Newbigin used the term “instrument” rather than witness.²⁹ An instrument fashions, shapes, makes, cultivates, repairs. Its value is in the use to which it is put. God has called and fashioned the church to be “an instrument through which God’s will for justice and peace and freedom is done in the world.”³⁰ Newbigin consistently defines the church’s role in relation to secular, not simply ecclesiastical, reality because the church serves the God who is at work within the whole of creation.

Finally, missional *ekklesiae* are to be a “foretaste” of God’s reign, in all the rich fullness that term implies. There are multiple biblical lines of significance related to the concept of foretaste, including the description of the Holy Spirit as *arrabon*, literally a deposit guaranteeing future fulfillment of a promised payment (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:14). Through the Spirit, the church is the messianic community here and now, experiencing and demonstrating in time and space the glory that will be revealed when the reign of God is fully consummated and we see God face to face.

The concept of foretaste naturally suggests food. Jesus’ table

²⁷ “On Being the Church for the World,” 136.

²⁸ See Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2012) for an extended critique of charity that benefits mainly the givers, not the receivers.

²⁹ “On Being the Church for the World,” 138.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

fellowship anticipated the gathering of God’s people at the heavenly banquet (Mt 8:11; Lk 14:23), the healing of a broken and unjust world (Rev. 19: 6-8), the overcoming of the curse of Eden and the restoring of God’s original shalom (Ezek 28; Rev 22.) The church remembers and participates in this vision when it breaks bread in Jesus’ name. Today, both historically sacramental and non-sacramental churches are discovering that the eucharist is more than a perfunctory ritual. A robust eucharistic life is an essential “instrument of mission.”³¹ Eucharistic *ekklesiae* will embrace the full range of meaning embedded in traditional practices. This includes modelling praise and gratitude—*eucharistia*—in the midst of the perpetual dissatisfaction and insatiable appetites of consumerism. It includes radical hospitality emulating Jesus’ willingness to break bread with tax collectors and sinners—and Pharisees!—and anticipating the heavenly banquet in which the first will be last and the last first.³²

Eucharistic *ekklesiae* will be communities of *hope*. They will live in the conviction that ultimately God’s faithfulness will not fail and all creation will be redeemed. After he retired, Lesslie Newbigin became the unpaid pastor of a small, struggling inner city congregation in Birmingham. While noting that people in the church’s neighbourhood were materially well-off compared to the grinding poverty he witnessed in India, Newbigin realized that “The commodity in shortest supply was hope.”³³ Embodying hope in the midst of the increasing hopelessness of our world is a pressing challenge, one that Christian congregations are uniquely positioned to address.³⁴

³¹ Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission After Christendom* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 100.

³² A growing “dinner church” movement is reintegrating radical hospitality, meal-centred worship, and the sacramental encounter with Christ. See www.styldias.org, www.dinnerchurchmovement.org. See also Glenn Packiam, *Blessed, Broken, Given: How Your Story Becomes Sacred in the Hands of Jesus* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Press, 2019).

³³ *A Newbigin Reader*, 143.

³⁴ Former nuclear physicist and Wall Street hedge fund manager Chris Arnade has travelled the U. S., chronicling what he calls “back row America”—communities hollowed out socially and economically by globalization and growing disparity. Non-religious himself, Arnade noted that the only building in these communities where the lights were on and hope was proclaimed were small, struggling, persistently hopeful churches. See Chris Arnade, *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America* (New York: Sentinel, 2019), 105.

Lesslie Newbigin's recognition that Western churches are in a missionary situation is one of the key ecclesiological insights of our time. A missional church requires a missional ecclesiology. The foundation of that ecclesiology is gathered and sent communities—missional *ekklesiae*.

GROWING THE GOSPEL IN TODAY'S CULTURE

By Christy Foldenauer

“What would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter of the gospel with modern Western culture?” Newbigin posed this question years ago, and it still leaves shepherds and theologians hypothesizing with energetic focus on their best days, and with some distress for how wide the gap remains between gospel and culture at their worst. How do Christ-followers disciple those who desire to know and follow Jesus but are entrenched in culture that in many ways, both covert and overt, resists the narratives of the gospel?

Spiritual formation flourishes today when four important shifts occur. For a genuine missionary encounter and life change to occur in modern Western culture, individuals need to:

- Belong (first) to a community;
- Have help to actively dismantle false narratives;
- Allow experience to become an authoritative discipleship force;
- Learn to interpret experience by reading Kingdom signs.

Belong (First) to a Community

I once worked at a church where the tagline was simple, “Believe, Belong, Become.” Etched into a bronze plate on the base of the brick sign out front, the words gleamed in the sunshine, like a beacon. I thought the phrase was a beautiful way of inviting people into faith. However, the longer I serve as a pastor, the more convinced I become that the words are misordered for the culture and time in which we serve. It is my assertion that in modern, Western culture, belonging precedes believing for most individuals, and the work of discipleship begins in this initial belonging, before a decision about faith is made by the individual. Spiritual formation for a modern Westerner flourishes when they feel both supported and safe to ask questions, to take risks, and to make mistakes in the company of others who are doing the same.

In Western culture, belief most often follows experience. Apps like Yelp and Angie’s List have risen in popularity, as the experience and evaluation of others increasingly drives the choices individuals make. The same is true of faith. Far less common are individuals walking the aisle to mark a decision to follow Jesus in a room full of strangers. The prevailing experience now is for the individual to enter a room full of strangers who, over time, become friends and sojourners, and to experience faith alongside others before choosing to believe. Belonging allows individuals who are exploring faith to see it in action and grow in their desire to experience a deeper faith personally.

“When we are seeking a way of life that is counter to the dominant culture,” Ruth Haley Barton writes, “we need support. We need community to practise with, a community that by our participation in it shapes our lives in positive ways.”¹ Individuals most often belong to the people of faith as part of a community before they belong to Jesus, and this reversal is underrecognized in churches today.

We see this in community as those coming to faith cite the faith stories and journeys of others in the room as influential in their own, personal decision. Watching a believer live out concepts like trust and surrender puts faith on display and makes belief more tangible and personal for people seeking to understand God’s work in the world today. Even better than reading an online review, individuals are seeing faith play out in real life and experience, and it turns out that genuine, authentic relationship with Jesus is irresistible.

This requires non-judgmental spaces for belonging as individuals explore faith together. “Human beings in community are like rocks in a riverbed; we are shaped by the flow of life in the communities we are a part of,” Barton asserts.² As the Church acknowledges belonging as precedent to believing, it must create distinct spaces³, or experiences, where an individual who is exploring faith can enter and join the conversation.

It is insufficient to simply offer a single, large gathering and put the impetus on Sunday morning worship. While some will choose to engage in a larger group as a starting point, discipleship becomes even more effective as group size decreases. Small group entry points (groups of 10-12), and even triads, become critical spaces for belonging that can lead to belief.

The concept of belonging, then, must also be worked out in each of these environments. Rather than structuring experiences around the current congregation of believers, the spaces must be built with explorers in mind; those who have more experience with culture than Christianity or Jesus. What is the onramp into each space? Does it exist? If not, it must be developed for the work of true formation and discipleship to begin. Leading businesses today are using a method to achieve “outside-

¹ Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2018), 127.

² Barton, 128.

³ J.R Woodward and Dan White Jr., *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2016), 155-160.

in” thinking called Journey Mapping, where customer experiences are documented and visualized, step by step. Faith communities would benefit from leveraging such an approach.

This reordering raises the fundamental question of how to disciple maturing believers alongside those exploring faith. Many have created an unnecessary dichotomy here, as there is no better experience to help an individual grow in their faith than to come alongside someone who is exploring what it means to know and follow Jesus. The energy and vitality which is created by this connection between believers and seekers is missing from our churches today. We don’t even realize it.

Have Help to Actively Dismantle False Narratives

Once an individual belongs in an environment that is structured for real conversation and spiritual challenge and growth, the real work of discipleship can begin. Discipleship is traditionally envisioned as building a construct that helps the follower to learn more of the Kingdom of God, and helps them to live like Jesus. While this definition is accurate, for a genuine missionary encounter to occur in the area of spiritual formation, false narratives perpetuated by culture must first be addressed and redressed. False narratives can be understood as lenses or statements relating to the gospel that have partial, but not complete truth. If we skip this important step of understanding and dismantling false narratives, the result will be that the believer will fit the work of Jesus into the context of their culture, rather than actively challenging that context.

False or conflated narratives can be subtle, and difficult to name, but they can significantly deform the spiritual life if left unchallenged. Thus, before the foundation can be laid for Christian formation, there is often dismantling of pre-conceived “Christian” narratives, which are often narratives of culture, not Kingdom.

A predominant false narrative I experience as an American is the conflation of Kingdom and American or western culture. When pledging allegiance to their country, Americans rehearse the idea of “one nation, under God.” But the purposes of a nation are not always synonymous with the purpose of the Kingdom, even if they sometimes align. Thus, the myth called “American exceptionalism”, which considers “America as an elect nation, the world-redeeming ark of Christ, chosen, above all the nations of the world, for a special dispensation”⁴ is deeply flawed.

⁴ Mark Slouka, “A Year Later: Notes on America’s Intimations of Mortality,” in *Harpers* 305 (September 2002): 36.

Admitting that the country falls short of the Kingdom of God becomes difficult for individuals who have twisted the narratives together, and assume that being American is part of living out the Kingdom today. This assumption of Kingdom and country as inextricably connected will result in a stunted discipleship for the new believer. While it is true that the United States was founded on some ideals that are, in fact, Christian in nature, there are also multiple narratives in the U.S. that run counter to gospel truth.

False narratives are not only political in nature. For instance, the ideal of happiness as something each individual has the right not only to pursue, but “to define it as he wishes,”⁵ runs counter to the gospel narrative of joy in all circumstances, and especially joy in trial. Americans are indoctrinated in the concept of individual happiness, and as a result, the Kingdom concept of joy becomes like a foreign language that must be comprehended and understood.

Joy is, in its essence, a signpost of the Kingdom of God at work. It must be recognized as such, and pointed to repeatedly as evidence of the gospel that runs counter to, and challenges, the cultural assumption. Instead, Christians consume content that affirms a “comfortable Jesus” (or a Jesus formed in their image) who brings happiness, as the individual defines it. Rather than calling culture into question, this comfortable Jesus supports modern culture and is present in the memes and motifs of the day, used too often to further the cause of any group or party that is bolstered by his presence. “The crowd casts “God” in its own image and equates the *vox populi* with the *vox Dei*.”⁶ This is problematic for spiritual formation, and must be addressed for the fullest expression of gospel-centered formation to occur.

Dismantling of false narratives is tricky at best. One approach is for the preacher, teacher, or discipler to identify the false narratives at work under the surface before beginning any interaction or message. This helps to shape more robust teaching and a deeper understanding of the Kingdom narrative. Theologian and pastor Tim Keller has worked extensively on false narratives, identifying a “hidden beliefweb of secularity,”⁷ or a system of beliefs and narratives that are not visible as

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 26.

⁶ Rodney Clapp, “God Is Not ‘A Stranger On the Bus’” in *God is Not ...* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 32.

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 124.

beliefs to the person who holds them. and enumerates five late-modern positions, or “baseline cultural narratives”⁸ which must be understood by modern day missionaries in order to accurately address each as it relates to Scripture.

The narratives identified by Keller are rationality (and an explanation of the natural world and material prosperity), history (and the progressive betterment of society over time as an expectation), society (and the individualistic freedom of choice), morality (and self-guided moral norms), and identity (and the internally driven discovery of value and purpose). Scripture speaks to each of these narratives in profound and important ways; culture also has much to say on each topic. Most frequently, a cultural view must be dismantled in order for the Kingdom understanding to completely emerge.

Current discipleship models teach the gospel of Jesus but most often fail to address the errant narratives which are deeply embedded in culture today. For genuine heart change to occur in Western culture, worldly narratives must be challenged as the Kingdom way is taught.

Allow Experience to Become an Authoritative Discipleship Force

Discipleship models have typically revolved around pictures or diagrams that explain Jesus, the fallen world in which we live, and the redemptive work of the Kingdom. Models feature two cliffs with a chasm between, or three circles, or use a line to show the work of God over time. Discipleship, of course, must be built on an understanding of God’s work in the world, and Kingdom movement over time. However, this is, once again, not enough for modern discipleship.

In seminary, I learned the “five *Solas*”⁹ and theologians have long debated the leading edge of faith. Should it be Scripture? Faith? Grace? Christ? The *Solas* stand the test of time, but over time, we’ve underestimated equally important work happening through experience, deep in the soul.

It is critical to be able to show an individual where God is already at work in their life. God woos them and works within their soul

⁸ Keller, 129-133.

⁹ The Five *Solas* are five Latin phrases: *Sola Scriptura* (scripture alone), *Sola Fide* (faith alone), *Sola Gratia* (grace alone), *Solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (to the glory of God alone). These phrases were popularized during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, and used to summarize key convictions of Reformers around the central aspects of the Christian faith.

to bring them to understand God's love and acceptance and their need for Jesus as Lord. Without acknowledging this work in the life of an individual, we shortcut the understanding of how they have been drawn into this moment, at this point in time, and we also fail to recognize the element that for most individuals now holds the most authority: the element of experience.

How did experience become the leading edge of faith for so many? Consider how much of modern culture comes to us in a prepackaged, predominantly mediated form.¹⁰ Fake news, disinformation, and even bots and spies now routinely shape information. As a result, culture has become skeptical of its mediated form. However, first-hand experience cannot be mediated. Therefore, it is an attractive force in a suspicious and cynical world.

Is it possible for someone to experience (without outside mediation) an encounter with the living God that moves them toward true relationship and begins the path of discipleship? The answer is invariably, yes. God is always at work in our midst, the Kingdom of God is always inbreaking, and God is present in our daily lives in real and profound ways. The ability of Christ-followers to point out the work of the Kingdom in their own lives, and in the lives of those who have not yet come to faith or are early in their spiritual formation, is the leading edge of discipleship in a meaningful encounter with western culture. "We don't bring the image of God to other people, we identify the image of God in other people. We go, knowing that our missionary God has already gone before us."¹¹

Discipling individuals who are early in their spiritual formation journey should involve not only teaching, but also a great deal of listening, and the holy work I have come to call "connecting the dots." In a similar fashion to the way an image emerges from the page when tiny numbers are sequenced and connected in an orderly fashion, an individual who is exploring faith benefits greatly from a faithful listener whose holy ears¹² can function as a mnemonic sorter and connection-maker.

In a culture where the Bible holds less authority over time in the lives of those not yet connected with faith, God is actively revealing

¹⁰ Clapp, 26.

¹¹ Woodward and White, 29.

¹² Eddie Hammett, *Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age: Building Bridges Instead of Barriers* (Nashville: Chalice Press, 2005), 62.

himself in the lives of people over time. An authentic experience with Jesus that is then evaluated and understood within the context of a trusted community is pivotal for those exploring the Christian faith. Modern discipleship must include evaluation of these kairos moments, and help faith explorers develop the lens of faith in experience. This can bring a richness and renewed understanding and relevance to God's work in the world today.

Learn to Interpret Experience by Reading Kingdom Signs

Connecting the dots of experience for someone who is exploring faith is then followed by building connections between culture and Kingdom that enable the person to go deeper. In modern society, brands, images, and people are often built through management of a careful composite of affirmation by culture, and also cancelled in a moment. The capacity to like or dislike content heightens a sense of control on the part of the consumer.

As Newbigin stated, "There can never be a culture-free gospel,"¹³ and so, as Jesus put on flesh to dwell among us, the gospel is always also interpreted through the lens of the culture. The Kingdom, however, is never at the beck and call of culture; culture is not the *compositor* of the gospel, and the gospel is not built nor diminished in the likes and dislikes of people. The Kingdom precedes Western culture and it is the role of the gospel, as the beginning of truth, to call into question the culture of our time.

The Kingdom is both now and not yet. Discipleship, then, is the practice of living the values of the Kingdom right now, and being shaped in the image of Christ. To accomplish this, we must become adept at reading signs.

Here, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning paints the most vivid picture:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware,
More and more from the first similitude.¹⁴

¹³ Newbigin, 4.

¹⁴ Nicholson, D. H. S., and Lee, A. H. E., eds. *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917; Bartleby.com, 2000. www.bartleby.com/236/.

Modern discipleship, then, becomes the work of helping individuals awaken to the Kingdom around them, and in them, and to acknowledge and move toward that work by learning to read the signs of God's Kingdom in action.

Years ago in Quebec, my husband and I wanted to take a horse-drawn carriage ride. The sign was in French, and we could not understand what it said. Approaching the sidewalk stand to ask if we could ride, we realized that the attendant also spoke only French. His words were lost on us, and although we desired to take the carriage ride, we were never able to figure out where to pay and hop aboard.

Too often, culture and church also miss connection because neither understands the signs or the language of the other. We lack the theological imagination to cultivate godly connections between culture and church, and to speak with fluency from one to another.

How does a modern missionary capture the language of culture? Are words even always required? "To witness is not just to say something or show something. It is to become a sign. Christian witness means becoming a sign of Christ," asserts Nicholas Adams.¹⁵ He continues:

Signs are not isolated things. A sign in a language one does not understand does not function as a sign, but as a puzzle. Signs need to be intelligible, so there need to be rules for interpreting them, and people who are skilled in using these rules. The world is full of signs of God, but they cannot function as signs unless people can read them. Likewise, Christians cannot be signs of Christ unless strangers can interpret them. To be a Christian is to be schooled in an apprenticeship of signs; it is to learn how to read the signs of God in the world. It is also to become a teacher, so that others may become apprentices in turn.

It is key, then, to a genuine missionary encounter with modern culture to learn the language, in order to read the signs. A missionary whose aim is discipleship must understand the signs of culture and the signs of the Kingdom, and be able to actively interpret both and teach others to do so.

Disciplers must be well-versed in the markers of the Kingdom, able to spot and interpret the work of God in the world that they might join God in this work. The way that an individual interprets Kingdom

¹⁵ Nicholas Adams, "Confessing the Faith: Reasoning in Tradition" in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Volume 9 (Ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Samuel Wells), (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 209.

signs can be referred to as their theology. Well-formed theology functions as the basis for sign-reading and interpretation, both of which are necessary for advancement of the gospel in the world today.

Why must a missionary be able to read the signs of God in order to function as witness to them? It is insufficient to simply “be” a sign, because discipleship begins in modern culture before most individuals who are being actively discipled could even put meaningful language to that experience. The starting point for a meaningful encounter with modern society is individual to individual, helping the person before us to see how God is, in fact, already present in *their* lives, rather than merely pointing to our own lives as proof of the Kingdom inbreaking.

Therefore, a theology of the Kingdom as both prevenient and present is essential to this understanding of discipleship.¹⁶ Active and ongoing discipleship teaches individuals to see the signposts of the Kingdom all around and enter the often uncomfortable work of taking up their cross.

Moving Forward

How we think about and respond to Newbigin’s question will largely determine our effectiveness in spiritual formation as we seek to make disciples as Jesus commanded us. Learning to see and say the signs of the Kingdom way of Christ will yield a more robust understanding of the incarnational Jesus made known to us as one who, as Eugene Peterson wordsmithed when translating John 1:14, “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”¹⁷ We must learn to point to the ways that God is already at work in the world and modern culture today, and help others find their way toward a deep and meaningful faith in the One who has been drawing people to Himself for all of time.

¹⁶ Leslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 56.

¹⁷ Scripture taken from Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2002).

A PLAUSIBLE VOCATION

by Aaron Miller

Shortly after my wife, Kate, and I were married, but before I was ordained, a mutual friend—a librarian—found a book called *How to Marry a Minister*, in a discard pile at the library where she worked.¹ She promptly mailed it to Kate, clearly as a gag.

What else could it be? The joke, of course, was not that it was being discarded, but that such a book was ever written in the first place—let alone published, and carried by a local public library! The book, written by Martha Hickman, wife of a Methodist minister, is exactly what the title promises: it contains specific instructions on how to meet and ultimately live in marital accord with an ordained minister of the Church. It is riotously funny, partly because Mrs. Hickman is a sharp and clever writer, and partly because of the assumption that marrying a minister was something to which young women (in this case, specifically women) would aspire. While there may yet be places in the world where the local minister is a catch, it is hard to imagine such a book being even conceived, never mind written and willingly read, today.

Yet, even though it was written in 1966, there is something about the way that life in ministry is described that is familiar to me, as someone vocationally serving the Church today. For instance, the chapter, *What Does Your Husband Do?* recalls conversations that are not unusual more than fifty years later:

. . . I am asked again and again the question ‘And what does *your* husband do?’

The answer is easy. ‘He is a minister.’

But then the small breezes of reaction begin to stir . . . There is the quick, flat ‘Oh, I see,’ which relegates the minister to a nice harmless pasturage among conventional and staid groups of people who preserve a timid and irrelevant status quo. There is the reaction of veiled hostility to or at least impatience with the church on the part of people who were perhaps overdosed with institutionalized ‘churchism’ in their childhood and have looked elsewhere for significant orientation of their life and values.²

¹ Martha Hickman, *How to Marry a Minister* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1968).

² *Ibid.*, 23. Also described are the too-enthusiastic gush of those who idolize clergy, and those who are genuinely curious.

It is safe to guess that anyone ordained or married to a clergy person has had similar interactions. Though, at this point we may need to add stunned confusion and total ignorance about Christian ministry to the list. Disinterest and disdain have multiplied. And, given Mrs. Hickman's experience of the public perception of ministry, it is not altogether surprising that the next generation of mainline clergy, in the West, were quite possibly the last who could confidently expect to spend their entire careers working solely in and for the Church.³ The conditions that made her book possible were all but gone.

That generation of clergy was being ordained right around the time that Leslie Newbigin was giving the lectures that became *Foolishness to the Greeks: the Gospel and Western Culture*.⁴ In that work, Newbigin gives a clear-eyed account of Western culture's increasingly disinterested and often hostile response to the proclamations and work of the Church. Prescient and urgent as his words are, it would be hard to argue that the conditions into which vocational ministers of the Church are called are not even more difficult now, than when he first wrote them.

Why Ministry?

The apparently unfavourable ground in which the Western Church is rooted does make one wonder why anyone in their right mind would choose to go into ministry, now, or anytime in the last forty years. Many, and perhaps most, speak of a sense of call, which—wonder of wonders—people still experience in and through the Church. God continues to call people, often unlikely and not entirely willing people, into this “odd and wondrous”⁵ work. Of course, with a modicum of sacrifice and commitment, a calling can be set aside and largely ignored. Nevertheless, the mainline seminary where my congregation meets is experiencing significant increases in enrollment.⁶ People are continuing to give their lives to this vocation, many of whom give up much more lucrative and

³ Obviously, not everyone who entered ministry in the 1980s stayed for their entire careers, and I understand that bi-vocationalism was talked about. But I do not know any clergy from that generation who were bi-vocational by necessity.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

⁵ Lilian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: the Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

⁶ The Vancouver School of Theology.

lauded possibilities.

Is this simply God's relentless and stubborn commitment to the Church as the "core element in the strategy of the Holy Spirit for providing human witness and physical presence to the Jesus inaugurated kingdom of God in this world"?⁷ Almost certainly. But, my experience has been that people continuing to answer a call to ministry is more than divine determination to show some of us how much we are to suffer for the name of Christ (Acts 9:16). And while many who are in (or are training for) ordered ministry now may not have taken on this work entirely of our own free will, there seems to be an increasing enthusiasm for the possibilities of pastoral leadership in a Church that the world neither notices nor cares for.

The fact is that the question that undergirds *Foolishness* is even more urgent, more interesting, and potentially more invigorating than it was nearly forty years ago. While Newbigin's contemporaries might possibly have been able to ignore it, the Western Church as a whole can no longer refuse to ask "what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and the culture that is shared by the peoples of Europe and North America."⁸ It is hard to imagine that churches and their leaders today can ignore the outward missional imperative of the gospel, even in a disinterested and disdainful culture, except to their own demise. We may wish it were otherwise. The regular closure of congregations suggests that we have often chosen wishful thinking.

But for many Church leaders the reality that the Christendom *status quo* is unsustainable is both as liberating and exciting, as it is daunting. Perhaps people are continuing to obey the call to pastoral ministry precisely because it is no longer guaranteed to be a good career option, in the service of an institution, but an opportunity to align our vocations with the true vocation of the Church as a witness to the kingdom of God in and for the world.⁹ No one ordained in the relatively

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 12.

⁸ Newbigin, 1.

⁹ I would not want to imply that anyone ordained during, or in the dying gasps of Christendom was simply a "careerist," or felt any less significant a divine call to kingdom witness. It was the witness of many faithful people that equipped me to hear my own call to pastoral ministry. Still, the option of ministry as a good, life-long career, with the prospect of a comfortable retirement is, if not gone, certainly less given. It is not, as it were, a safe bet.

recent past, or who is training for pastoral ministry today, got into this unaware that the Church has some work to do. For me, and many of my colleagues, it is a gift that the Church is weird again.

A New Plausibility

Perhaps the most pastorally fruitful insights in *Foolishness*, for a missional church, concern what Newbigin calls “plausibility structures.”¹⁰ A full treatment of what he means by that is beyond the scope of this article. However, briefly, it concerns the fact that the gospel says something radically different about the world and our place in it than the narrative that emerges from the Enlightenment, which was developed throughout Modernist thought and practice, and which currently dominates public discourse. Newbigin acknowledges that religion, broadly speaking, has been entirely relegated to the realm of personal values—one of any number of options for orienting one’s life. Religion, and in our case, Christianity, is assumed to be a set of *private values*, often at odds and never to be confused with the public world of *facts*, ruled principally by modern science.¹¹ The end result is that what modern science, and its derivative disciplines, tell us is inescapably “true,” while biblical Christian commitment can only be a matter of personal choice and opinion. Indeed, it has been my experience that, for pastors and preachers anywhere to the left of fundamentalism, it is more important for us to make clear publicly that we “believe” in science than that we are wholeheartedly committed to anything in Scripture. It is more important that I affirm my confidence in the Big Bang and the theory of evolution, than that I believe that the Beatitudes are true, or the possibility of miracles, or that God might actually be up to something abundantly far beyond our asking or imagining (Matt 5: 1-12; Eph 3: 20).

Under these conditions, inherited or cultural Christianity is increasingly unreasonable, even unviable. Where in Christendom we might have been nominally Christian simply by accident of birth, now the name actually requires conversion.¹² After centuries, Christians are no longer born; they must (again) be made.¹³ A coherent Christian public witness is no longer supported by the discursive complexes of the surrounding culture; it can only be the result of sustained Christian

¹⁰ Newbigin, 62.

¹¹ Newbigin, 44.

¹² Newbigin, 62.

¹³ This is Tertullian’s insight, in the second century.

formation, in and through the Church.¹⁴ Though the gap between Christian faith and the assumedly objective and secular work of scientists is not nearly as significant as some would have us believe, Modern Science has undoubtedly and unavoidably established an alternative understanding of how things truly are.¹⁵ Christian faith is a contradictory commitment to understanding the world, indeed the cosmos, not by mastery of its component parts, but in light of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

That fact of God's saving work in Christ is essential for considering what a missional encounter between the gospel and our culture might look like, how it might be lived. Charles Mathewes cautions and encourages:

Typically, 'public theologies' are self-destructively accommodationist: they let the 'larger' secular world's self-understanding set the terms, and then ask how religious faith contributes to the purposes of public life, so understood. In contrast, a theology of public life defines 'the public' theologically, exploring its place in the created and fallen order and in the economy of salvation.¹⁶

Or, as Richard Topping succinctly puts it: the Church often aims at relevance, and hits redundancy dead-center.¹⁷ Our goal is not relevance, but "the announcement of a name and a fact that offer the starting point for a new and life-long enterprise of understanding and coping with experience. To accept it means a new beginning, a radical

¹⁴ Anthony B. Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 167. "The instinct of those formed by Christendom was that the most important thing churches can do is speak on public issues. But effective speech and action on public issues is the outcome of sustained Christian formation."

¹⁵ Newbigin contends that the removal of purpose is the most significant difference. "But we shall not be wrong, I think, if we take the abandonment of teleology as the key to the understanding of nature for our primary clue to the understanding of the whole of these vast changes in the human situation." Newbigin, 34.

¹⁶ Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1. See also, Newbigin, 41.

¹⁷ Richard Topping, "Theological Studies: Keeping it Odd," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 37/1, Spring 2019, 4.

conversion.”¹⁸

More and more, my experience is that those who are called into ministry now heed that call because we are captivated by a vision of the world that is “irrelevant” to the current order of things. We are eager for a new plausibility—or rather, an old one. Many of us are yearning to play our part in a “community that is itself engaged in that contradiction, is actually pitting its life against ‘the ruler of this world,’ and—in fellowship with Jesus—is bearing the cost in its own life.”¹⁹

Missional Ministry

Newbigin’s grounding question, “what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and [our] culture,” requires us to think about the vocation of pastoral ministry in a missional way. What does it mean to preach and teach, administer the sacraments, and provide pastoral care in a way that both orients the Church towards the world for which it exists, and nurtures the peculiarity that Gospel commitment requires?²⁰ The answer to that question may have to be as broad as the diversity of people who are working out this vocation and as varied as the contexts they find themselves in. Nevertheless, at the risk of generalization, I want to suggest two things that I think are essential for those of us called to serve the Church as vocational ministers into the future.

First, discipleship and vocation must be inseparable. Eugene Peterson makes the bold claim that there is no vocation that is quite as easy to “fake it” as ministry:

By adopting a reverential demeanor, cultivating a stained-glass voice, slipping occasional words like ‘eschatology’ into conversation and *heilsgeschichte* into our discourse—not often enough to actually confuse people but enough to keep them aware that our habitual train of thought is a cut above the pew level—we are trusted, without any questions asked, as stewards of the mysteries.²¹

¹⁸ Newbigin, 148.

¹⁹ Newbigin, 63.

²⁰ The ordination vows of The United Church of Canada are to the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care.

²¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 6.

There may be more questions asked these days than there once were, but even so, it remains possible to say the right things, show up at the right times, memorize some prayers and perfect some liturgies, while also sidestepping the necessity of our own radical conversion. It goes without saying that ministers live by grace like everyone else; clergy are also part of the gathering of sinners, brought together by and subject to the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. But if Newbigin is right and Christians are called to be people sold out for an alternative way, in all our engagements with the world around, then those of us who have the privilege and responsibility of pastoral work need to be striving for lives as integrated as we hope for our people. We cannot help the teachers and doctors, plumbers and lawyers, farmers and stay-at-home parents (and on and on), who make up congregations, to live lives of Christian witness if we are not attempting to do that with integrity ourselves. It is no easier, and no less urgent, for us than for anyone. Our essential vocation is the same as every Christian: “to be people marked by the renewing of [our] minds and imaginations, who no longer conform to the pattern that is destroying our world.”²²

The second thing, intimately tied to the first, is that pastoral ministry in the twenty-first century will be increasingly entrepreneurial; or, more biblically: apostolic. Not because we are especially creative, or capable, or savvy, but because we will, of necessity, be more and more in step with the God who calls us.²³ Shane Claiborne writes:

Traditional thinking about *mission* and *missionary* tends to assume that we are taking God to a godless people or a godless place. But God is everywhere, always ahead of us. So missions is more about recognizing where God is at work and joining in. Places cannot be God forsaken, but they can be church forsaken.²⁴

For Claiborne the church-forsaken places tend to be what he and

²² Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical, 10th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 140; Romans 12:2.

²³ I often hear the first half of Romans 12:2 quoted, but not the second half: “*so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*” (Italics added)

²⁴ Claiborne, 133.

his co-conspirators call the “abandoned places of the empire”—typically inner cities with high rates of poverty.²⁵ But Newbigin makes clear that there are all sorts of church-forsaken places. The Church has ceded ground just about everywhere. In most communities, except occasionally in the vaguest and most ceremonial sense, the Church has abandoned board rooms and schools, art galleries and coffee shops, town halls and playgrounds—anywhere that our “personal beliefs” might grate against the world of “public facts.” Pastoral leaders ought to be eager to learn how to bear witness to the beauty and wonder of the gospel, boldly and generously, creatively and lovingly, with “gentleness and reverence,” in all the places where it is deemed inappropriate.²⁶ And we need to help our people do the same. No doubt, this is a significant challenge for those of us who have been taught that our faith is a private thing, a personal choice. It is by no means yet a strength of mine. But we keep on striving.²⁷

How we engage in witness will require not only a solid grasp of the traditions of our faith, and a life rooted in Scripture and prayer, but a willingness to be surprised at the ways and places in which God wants to be made known. One oft-quoted passage in this uncertain season of Church life is Isaiah 43: 18-21, because it is instructive for helping develop an imagination for how we might witness to God’s work in the world. In it, God declares divine intention to do a “new thing,” different from what has gone before. Everything in this passage is unlikely: the new thing begins not in the Temple or the synagogue, but—as so many formative things—in the wilderness; it starts among some unexpected creatures: jackals and ostriches; not lions and eagles. There are paths cut through the wilderness, rivers flowing in the desert, improbably worshiping animals. It serves as a reminder that God’s work is always surprising and creative, and so should our witness be—ever trusting that ours is the God who both calls and goes ahead. Thanks be.

²⁵ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It has to Say to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 80; Claiborne, 379.

²⁶ “Here the new factor entering in is the possibility of full, or at least growing, reciprocity.” Newbigin, 84; 1 Peter 3: 15.

²⁷ Newbigin, 88.

SPEAKING FOOLISHNESS TO THE GEEKS

by Linda Yates

The 500-year old fact-based plausibility structure is collapsing. In his book *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Lesslie Newbigin argued the Enlightenment set in motion the building of a public world in which the only truth is that which could be observable, measurable and subsequently declared factual. As such, the gospel truth-claim of a resurrected Christ could only be part of the private world of values because it could not be proven factually.¹ Unlike Newbigin, we now live in a world in which science and facts are relegated to the private world of value choices. Science now sits alongside “Jesus is resurrected” as simply one more private value to choose.

Phoebe Buffay was prescient

In the 90’s, popular culture was not yet fragmented so there was a kind of canon of North American popular culture. The comedy show *Friends* was part of this canon. It centres around the stressed lives of six friends in New York City. One is Ross, a scientist who is frequently in conflict with Phoebe, a massage therapist and “alternative” healer. One day Phoebe declares she does not believe in evolution.

ROSS: Ok, Phoebe, this is it. In this briefcase I carry actual scientific facts. A briefcase of facts, if you will. Some of these fossils are over 200 million years old.

PHOEBE: Ok, look, before you even start, I'm not denying evolution, ok, I'm just saying that it's one of the possibilities.

ROSS: It's the only possibility, Phoebe.

PHOEBE: Ok, Ross, could you just open your mind like this much, ok? Wasn't there a time when the brightest minds in the world believed that the world was flat? And, up until like what, 50 years ago, you all thought the atom was the smallest thing, until you split it open, and this like, whole mess of crap came out. Now, are you telling me that you are so unbelievably arrogant that you can't admit that there's a teeny tiny possibility that you could be wrong about this?

ROSS: There might be, a teeny, tiny, possibility.

PHOEBE: I can't believe you caved.²

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 14, Kindle.

² Excerpted from Episode 3, Series 2 (1995-6) of *Friends*, a

I do not agree with David Hopkins, who said, in his now famous essay, that *Friends*, by making anti-intellectualism popular, caused the end of the world as we know it.³ It is more likely popular culture was reflecting the shooing of science into the private realm of value “choices.” Scientists were slowly being removed from, as Newbigin would say, the priesthood of public values.⁴

Now that science has been relegated to the private world, a new plausibility structure is replacing it. Currently, to discover what is really “true,” we use the internet to navigate through Google, Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia and so on. Algorithms designed to tempt each one of us to keep clicking and buying, throw slanted versions of reality toward us. Algorithms manage our associations with our digital neighbours, carefully keeping us from those who would interrupt our dedicated cyber-tunneling. We have our own, individual customized worldviews constructed for us. These worlds seem plausibly real because we believe we have personally chosen the credible paths that constructed it.

How would Newbigin encourage us to speak truth to this new plausibility structure? How can we participate in revealing the Christ-centric plausibility structure to such a world? How is the Covid-19 pandemic affecting this new plausibility structure?

Creation of “The Unreal”

Newbigin described the fact-based plausibility structure arising from the Enlightenment which led the European West to develop the “science” of economics.⁵ This science assumed a self-adjusting, economic system in which “self-interest is a universal, material and calculable force analogous in this realm to the forces of gravity . . . and as independent of theology as is the physics of Newton.”⁶ He observed the capitalist system is “powered by the unremitting stimulation of covetness.”⁷ In such a system individual freedom is the ultimate goal, which leads to an inevitable tolerance of inequality. Christian faith is relegated to the

Bright/Kauffman/Crane Production in association with Warner Bros. Television.

³ David Hopkins, “How a TV Sitcom Triggered the Downfall of Western Civilization: the one where we retain our sanity in a stupid world,” *Medium*, March 21, 2016, <https://gen.medium.com/how-a-tv-sitcom-triggered-the-downfall-of-western-civilization-336e8ccf7dd0>

⁴ Newbigin, 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

private, individual world of “value” choices. People are free to choose Christ, but the truth claims of God in Christ must not enter into the public realm as they are a) unprovable as factual and b) may impinge on some other individual’s right to choose differing private values.⁸

Communism was a direct response to the terrible inequalities evident in the unfettered capitalism of the Industrial Revolution. As he wrote in 1986, the disintegration of the Soviet Union had not yet happened. Newbiggin observed that total equality, at the expense of individual freedom, was the stated goal of communist regimes. Yet, communist states inevitably fail because, without freedom, it is impossible to prevent some groups from becoming oppressively powerful, ruling over a suffering population where innovation and creativity is constricted. In these systems religion is not allowed in either public or private worlds. Newbiggin describes socialism, in practice, as “the politics of nowhere.”⁹

Newbiggin said both systems marginalize the human being in service to the system. “In regard to the ultimate goal of history, they (humans) are expendable means, not ultimate ends.”¹⁰

Liberal democracies depend on a fact-based plausibility structure which ultimately gave rise to scientific method. Something is deemed a fact by having been observed and described through experiments. Results are then peer-reviewed and published. If the results are repeatable by another researcher, the results become part of the accepted fact canon. Scientific method assumes there is always more to learn and therefore previous facts will be modified as they are displaced by new facts. Although Newbiggin lamented a public world organized by a fact-based plausibility structure he also advised that God was infused in the world of science too, because God pulls everything toward the eschaton. In the meantime, our Christian faith heals the rift between the public and private.¹¹

Now that the process of rebuttal and modification are immediately distributable, public illiteracy of basic scientific methodology has resulted in the view that scientists don’t know anything because they change their minds. This could be observed in the Covid-19 pandemic as public confidence in medical expert’s advice decreased as

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

new knowledge became available.¹²

With the end of the Cold War in 1991, the 500-year-old reliance upon science as the official foundation of the plausibility structure began to weaken. I believe heightened emphasis on individual freedom of choice grew exponentially because it remained unchallenged by the constant claims—albeit false in practice—by communist states of the primacy of the ideal of radical equality for all citizens. This heightened emphasis on freedom of choice increased perception that each individual’s private value choice has its own truth claim which, in effect, negates *any* public plausibility structure. The internet and exploding computer power available to the majority of western citizens empowered this trend making the geeky oligarchs of Silicon Valley the priests of the new plausibility structure.

Today, armed with self-gleaned knowledge from search engines, blogs, Facebook memes and so on, members of the public are led by algorithms to choose which scientific “facts” meet their needs at any given time. This has had real world implications for mass suffering. In 1998 Andrew Wakefield published a now widely debunked paper which linked autism to vaccinations. Despite being repeatedly demonstrably debunked, his conclusions proliferated online, thereby creating a vaccine skepticism movement that continues to grow, as does the dramatic incidence of measles and mumps.¹³

Newbiggin’s assertion that the truth claims of the gospel must speak back to and engage with the fact-based plausibility structure, needs adjustment when the structure is collapsing into just one more personal value choice. This collapse has led to increases in populism, white supremacy and neo-fascism.

Assembling Crumbs of Our Own Plausibility System of “The Unreal”

Our online lives are now governed and organized by algorithms. Algorithms are designed to sell us stuff. If you reveal to someone on

¹² Victoria Smith, Alicia Wanless, “Unmasking the Truth: Public Health Experts, Coronavirus, and the Raucous Marketplace of Ideas,” paper, Carnegie International Endowment for Peace website, July 16, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/16/unmasking-truth-public-health-experts-coronavirus-and-raucous-marketplace-of-ideas-pub-82314>.

¹³ Fiona Godlee, Jane Smith, and Harvey Marcovitch, “Wakefield’s article linking MMR vaccine and autism was fraudulent,” *BMJ*, 2011; 342:c7452 <https://www.bmj.com/content/342/bmj.c7452>.

Facebook that you have diabetes, you immediately will find ads for diabetes products appearing in your feed. Although Silicon Valley oligarchs assure us algorithms are amoral, great harm can come from unchecked algorithms. Researchers from Pro-Publica demonstrated in 2017 that Facebook algorithms would help them promote and direct three anti-Semitic posts towards people who were anti-Semitic.¹⁴ However, many important movements like BlackLivesMatter and MeToo have grown, gained power and efficacy through these same algorithmic processes.

Ethan Zuckerman says we now are in a collective state where we accept life in “The Unreal.” He argues:

The conflict between Trump’s reality and that of the mainstream media leads to the sense that we are no longer arguing a partisan battle over the interpretation of a common set of facts, but over facts from our own realities that both represent and lead inexorably to our own point of view. I have started to think of this clash of realities as “the Unreal.” I don’t mean to identify a singular unreality—Trump’s, QAnon’s, or anyone else’s—but to make the point that what’s real to you is unreal to someone else.¹⁵

Self-selected realities combined with algorithms now form the basis of, to use Newbigin’s terminology, a new “plausibility structure of The Unreal.” An example of this is the QAnon conspiracy, a phenomenon in which a few internet social media posters invite content from followers then publish bizarre political/scientific conspiracy theories as fact. At first widely dismissed it has gained enough credence for an ardent follower, Lauren Boebert, to be elected to Congress.

Essayist Walter Kirn explored this phenomenon saying: “The audience for internet narratives doesn’t want to read, it wants to write. It doesn’t want answers provided, it wants to search for them.” Members of

¹⁴ Julia Angwin, Madeline Varner and Ariana Tobin. “Facebook Enabled Advertisers to Reach ‘Jew Haters,’” *ProPublica*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-enabled-advertisers-to-reach-jew-haters>.

¹⁵ Ethan Zuckerman, “QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal,” *Journal of Design and Science*, Issue 6, July 2019, <https://doi.org/10.21428/7808da6b.6b8a82b9>.

the QAnon aren't just readers of Q's "drops"—they are the "bakers," assembling crumbs into coherent narratives and predictions."¹⁶

Who are the beneficiaries of The Unreal? Historian Timothy Snyder in his book *On Tyranny* states that "post-truth is pre-fascism" and "Fascists despised the small truths of daily existence, loved slogans that resonated like a new religion, and preferred creative myths to history or journalism."¹⁷

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Then Covid came which cracked the Unreal a little and, to quote Phoebe Buffay, this whole mess of crap came out:

- The fragility of supply chains and "just in time" delivery was laid bare in the almost immediate shortages of necessities during lockdown. There was a glimpse of the lie of neoliberal capitalism which promises eternal, immediate supplies of lots of cheap stuff for everyone.
- Socioeconomic factors greatly affected which communities suffered most with Covid-19. Individual covetousness has not delivered basic needs for many.
- Frontline workers like cashiers, truckers, janitors and so on were revealed to be essential to the functioning of society. Our dependence upon those who society deems of little account is disorienting.
- The fact plausibility structure had to be pulled back into the public realm in order to describe and mitigate the danger to the world's peoples. Those countries whose leaders refused to do so experienced the most Covid-19 infection.
- The fact that we need to wear facemasks, not to protect ourselves, but to protect others and therefore, indirectly protect ourselves, has literally made visible the reality that we are all interdependent.
- Underlying rage at gross structural inequalities that have been facilitated by white supremacy and patriarchy is overflowing amidst a general Covid anxiety.
- In enforced isolation, we have learned we need to be in human relationship more than we realized.

¹⁶ Walter Kirn, "The Wizard of Q," *Harpers Magazine*, June 2018, <https://harpers.org/archive/2018/06/the-wizard-of-q/>

¹⁷ Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 71, Kindle edition.

- When ordered to shelter in place, those who have no place have no shelter. Christian compassion and justice-seeking notwithstanding, those who have shelter, income and food have a vested interest in making sure others do too, lest Covid-19 spread to everyone.
- The excessive mortality rates of seniors in Continuing Care homes put real numbers behind Newbigin's acerbic observation that, "the old can be neither objects nor subjects of hope but only an increasingly burdensome embarrassment" in a death-denying society.¹⁸

Newbigin contended "the bible offers a vision of human nature for which neither equality or freedom is fundamental. What is fundamental is relatedness. The breakdown of relationships will destroy freedom and will destroy equality, but neither of these will be achieved by being sought for itself."¹⁹ Human relationship is fundamental to being human and being in relationship with God. Covid revealed this eternal truth.

A missional encounter with the Unreal

We all need to learn and speak about science again. Governments must be held accountable to environmental, health and social science standards. Christians must also consider that God is in the science too. Those who benefit from making the new plausibility structure into The Unreal thrive on the abolition science to the private world of choices. Newbigin suggested those who work in these kinds of fields have God-given tasks and are answerable directly to God.²⁰

As in science, God is also in the midst of the algorithms. Our creativity and manipulation of cyberspace has eschatological implications because God is pulling it toward a redeemed end. We have to live in the plausibility structure of the Unreal as if we are real. We are real because God loves us into being. We are all called, therefore, to enter the conversations of the cyber-world and live within it as if we really do follow Christ.

Rev. Aaron Billard is a model missionary.²¹ He founded *the Unvirtuous Abbey* social media ministry. He said it arose out of a call to write prayers that were humorous, resonated with real life struggles and were more theologically expansive than presently available. He prays, for

¹⁸ Newbigin, 28.

¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

²⁰ Ibid., 143,

²¹ Telephone interview with Rev. Aaron Billard, July 28, 2020.

example, for the parent who has to watch the same cartoon for the billionth time. He shares funny, often sarcastic religious memes and speaks to the serious issues of the day by helping people laugh. It has become an international ministry. Aaron offers testimony about the redeeming work of Jesus Christ to the plausibility structure of the Unreal. People speak back to him, some of deep wounds, some with challenging questions, most with relief they are not alone in their quest to know God. He says he has received more kindness than he has given. People's kindness, compassion and sense of humour in the midst of struggle and pain have taught him about the love of God made real.

Yet, as Newbigin reminds us all, when you live your life as if your faith has a real claim on you, pain will ensue.²² Sometimes Aaron receives criticism, the most painful often coming from colleagues. I asked him about a particularly painful episode which I knew resulted in him deciding to step away for a while. Why did he come back? He said, in the chaotic days of Covid-19 lockdown, his brother reminded him the world needed *the Unvirtuous Abbey* to speak words of hope. Aaron reminded me that Gerald Caron taught that Christians do not follow the cross, but if you follow Jesus, the cross will come your way.²³ Aaron said his commitment to re-enter cyberspace again was immediately met with gratitude for the return of the hope that pithy, funny memes can offer. His biggest base of engaged responders are people who are "dipping their toes in the Christian faith," or who are leaving or returning to church. They have taught him by helping him to sift and articulate his own faith. This is the mission field speaking back, the "true understanding" and "listening missionary dialogue" spoken of by Newbigin.²⁴ Aaron says the work pulls people living in the world of the unreal back into the real world of considering that God might, after all, love them unconditionally.

Aaron is unashamed of Jesus. Many of us divide our social media audience groups, limiting our "faith" talk to only those we think are also making this private "religious choice." What prevents us from speaking to all people of how our faith helps us make decisions in our lives, how it informs what we find beautiful, "likeable" or disturbing? Doing so would also ground us in the real substance of our own spirits as we tunnel through The Unreal.

Finally, nothing defeats the death-dealing powers of the world

²² Ibid., 143.

²³ Gerald Caron taught both Aaron and me. We believe this quote was from a Biblical Studies course at the Atlantic School of Theology circa 1996.

²⁴ Newbigin, 139.

more than choosing to be together at eucharist. During Covid-19 lockdown, Easter communion was offered by many churches contemporaneously online. Like so many others, my spouse and I took part with our own bread and wine. Surprised by joy, I felt the spirit of Christ come through our screen into and onto us as we gathered with people around the world at Christ's table. Together we all claimed an improbable hope in the redemptive love of God. We declared on an Easter morning throughout a frightened world that Jesus Christ is risen. Neither Covid nor fascism will prevail. This cyber-sacrament spoke the real Word back through the mission fields of the Unreal. Foolishness to the Geeks, indeed!

From the Heart

WEIRD CHURCH Ingrid Brown

*What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun. –*
Ecclesiastes 1:9 (NIV)

There is nothing new under the sun. Seems like a strange way to start the story of a tiny baby church in a tiny old village on a very big Vancouver Island. I am the Rev. Ingrid Brown, Minister of Weird Church, a new United Church of Canada community formed in the Village of Cumberland, BC. And if you know me and you know Cumberland, you know why this is called *Weird* Church.

More on that later: first let's take a moment to do a little visualization. Imagine a lush grassy clearing at the edge of a dense wood, dark and mysterious. The clearing comes to an abrupt end, sharply descending down, down, down to the jagged rocks and spraying rapids below. A rickety old bridge, grey with age, the odd slat having succumbed to the terror below, sways ever so gently, anchored at the edge of the cliff. On the other side: Paradise. And there I stand in the clearing, brown curls springing in all sorts of directions, inviting folks, as they gingerly step from the forest, hands raised to the bright midday sun, to join me. To rest a while. To know and be known here in this clearing, feeling the warmth of the sun and the closeness of others who have found themselves here.

In the last days of seminary, and leading up to my Ordination, this was the image I was given—by the Holy Spirit, I think, but we shall see—when prompted to pray and reflect on the nature of God's call on my life. It was the following Fall, September 2018, that Weird Church was born.

Of course, no story is complete without a backstory, so let's begin in 1888 . . . That was the start of St. George's Presbyterian Church—the miner's church—in Cumberland. Joining the Union in 1925, it became Cumberland United Church (CUC) and remained a solid congregation for generations, even after the Great Split of 1988 (the birth year of the Community Church down the road). Not without the challenges of most rural churches in small communities undergoing big

changes, CUC carried on until the building seemed to grow too large and the community too small, and it closed the doors permanently (or so they thought!) in November of 2017.

“What?” cried the Villagers, “say it isn’t so! What will the Village be without the church?!” *But you never came*, retorted the parishioners. “Of course not! We aren’t religious! Where will we go at Christmas? My grandparents got married there! Will it become a brewery?” *Who knows*, they responded dejectedly, *but we cannot carry this forward anymore. It is in God’s hands now.* And so the church was listed with Colliers and all began to wait and watch.

Armed with the love of our siblings in Christ, a cohort from St. George’s United Church in Courtenay (the neighbouring town) rode into Cumberland to see how we might shepherd, or at least pray with, these now homeless sheep. Through the veil of grief, one bleated their sorrow—they would miss having coffee and talking about things that really matter.

And so the initial seeds for *something in Cumberland* were planted, with a not quite ordained Associate Minister of Christian Education and Outreach (that’s me!), the fairly freshly ordained Lead Minister (Rev. Ryan Slifka), and a faithful and enthusiastic Board of Elders at St. George’s UC in Courtenay. We dreamed of a new shoot growing from a nurse log; the solid yet fallen tree nourishing new growth. Not a new church, but a re-seeding of sorts. With support from the Conference (now Region), we began with a monthly discussion group in a Cumberland coffee shop we dubbed, *Coffee and Conversations that Matter*, and invited all of those wayward sheep to join us. None did. But 16 others from the neighbourhood did!

So our monthly group began and grew, and shrank, and grew, and shifted. But there was something of a new community forming. A group of faithful church go-ers, never been to church-ers, had to leave church-ers, and the all too well known SBNRs (spiritual but not religious). We talked about God and prayer and the Bible and culture and the news and the President who shall not be named. We wondered together about our stumbling blocks to faith, our brokenness, and gardening as resistance, prayer, and social justice. It became clear that God was up to something, and with much discernment of who and where we were, the name *Weird Church* came to be. Because it’s like church, but weird. And so are we. The Village of Cumberland has a strong sense of identity as being the quirky sibling in the tri-cities and outlying areas that make up the Comox Valley, and within it so did our rag tag group of God-seekers, activists,

wonderers, and wanderers. We decided that if life was messy, church should be too and so that became our tag line.

We continued with our monthly *Coffee and Conversations that Matter* and then someone asked if we could do church in the forest. Yes! A fine idea indeed! So, we added another monthly event to our gathering time: *Weird Church in the Woods*; a walking, sharing, meditating, reflecting time in the forest where we listened for the Divine to speak to us through Psalms and trees. Could we do a pilgrimage on Mount Washington (the local ski hill)? Yes! A fine idea indeed! So began our annual *Snowshoe Pilgrimage*; a journey together across the land and into deeper connection with God.

As we lived in and listened to the neighbourhood, we began to be able to speak the language of the heart of our neighbours. We laughed, wept and dreamed together of a world that could be, learning to trust a love that I know well but most of the weirdos—they called themselves that!—were very tentative about. Most who attend Weird Church are spiritual refugees of sorts: whether it is from trauma, conflict, incongruity or fear, many swore off church years ago. Others are completely unchurched—never having heard any stories of faith (except for the usual suspects) and never having been able to connect those to their lived reality.

By the Spring of our first year, we had outgrown the coffee shop, and were very gently handed our eviction notice. And that big old beautiful building with the bell tower and the red roof just three blocks away still had not sold. The one weirdo who came over from CUC still had a key! So, we became church squatters; homeless weirdos who planned never to be in a church, meeting in a church. (Don't worry, we did get the Region's blessing to squat until a seller came along). And something changed; the shift in the community was ever so small but there was *something* to being in that place; all of those people who had prayed and laughed and cried and sang since 1888 comforted and warmed us. It was safer to explore in that space, and not just because it was out of the fishbowl gathering place of a bustling café, but we felt the presence of the ancient, of ancestors, of the saints who had come before us.

“We need a celebration! Can we all have dinner together?” cried a weirdo one evening. Yes! A fine idea indeed! There is a section in *Short Stories by Jesus* where Amy-Jill Levine is reflecting on the feeding of the five thousand and she notes, “what is infectiously appealing about Jesus is that he likes to celebrate. He is consistently meeting people not

at the altar but at table . . . he is indiscriminate about his dining companions . . . to be in his presence is not only to be challenged and comforted; it is to celebrate at table.” And so *Friday Feast* became our third regular monthly gathering. A community meal with local musicians, readings, reflections, and prayer. We had this big building after all, why not use it while we could? We moved pews and ate in the sanctuary together—each month a new topic, new local artists—some from our community of weirdos, some invited in. At the end of each gathering, an invitation to the Communion table. “Feel free to watch this strange old Christian thing we do, and if you are drawn to it, come and join in.” And they did. Folks who had been kicked out, beat up, singled out and scorned. Those who were dubbed freaks and geeks, has-beens and never-will-bes. They came and received, and were blessed by the Sacrament that is Jesus. Did all of them understand? No. Do any of us really understand?

Year two of Weird Church was a move from throwing things at the wall to see what stuck, to building a more consistent rhythm and attendance. We carried on with our three monthly gatherings, adding in something different each month: book studies, kids day camp, All Souls, and more. We also welcomed the community for our first Christmas service, *A Weird Christmas*, and like the Grinch, my heart grew three sizes that day. Peering out the doors into the snowy evening, we saw our neighbours walking towards the warm light of the church. Old and young, churched and not, members from the closed congregation and our own weirdos. The church was packed as we shared music, community, and that ancient story in fun new ways. Of course, it ended with lit candles and *Silent Night*—can any United Church Christmas service be any other way? It was that day that I knew Weird Church had become a place of belonging, not just for the church refugees we set out to connect with, but also for the whole neighbourhood.

We carried on until the dreaded news: a buyer had put in an offer. What were we to do? The sale could fund the ministry for years into the future, but what would come of this lovely place of community gathering? And what about the artists? Weird Church had become a place for local artists and musicians to showcase their work—where would they go? It is a longer and more complex story, but suffice it to say, the Region has retained ownership and is allowing us to remain, squatters turned tenants. We have a big vision for what this old building, stewarded over generations, can become for us and the whole neighbourhood, but that is for a later issue. We were fortunate to obtain a

grant from the Pacific Mountain Region, LeaderShift Church Planting Project, and have additionally funded the building through offerings and building rentals."

At the start of 2020, Weird Church was really building momentum, our gatherings were growing, we were becoming more known in the local community, and the other local Ministers had come to recognize Weird Church as a member in the body. Partnerships with community groups were growing and thriving and visions of a shared future were growing legs, transitioning into on the ground action and activism.

And then COVID-19. Like most congregations across the country, we moved online and found new ways of gathering as community. When permitted by the health authorities, we gingerly moved out of our homes and into the park, gathering in person once again, distanced and safe, using technology in new and wonderful ways. August brought more wind back into the Weird Church sails: the Artist-in-Residence program we had been planning long before COVID came to fruition and we welcomed a young hip organist to create new music on our old organ, bringing live music back to the ears of Cumberland residents all around the neighbourhood. The core leadership of Weird Church (foremost weirdos/keepers of the church) also gathered in August, to vision and plan for the very unknown year ahead. *Could we, they wondered, meet weekly? Perhaps with prayers and music? And readings? And maybe you could offer us a teaching, and we can discuss it? So, like an actual church service? Yes, like church, but weird. Yes! A fine idea indeed!*

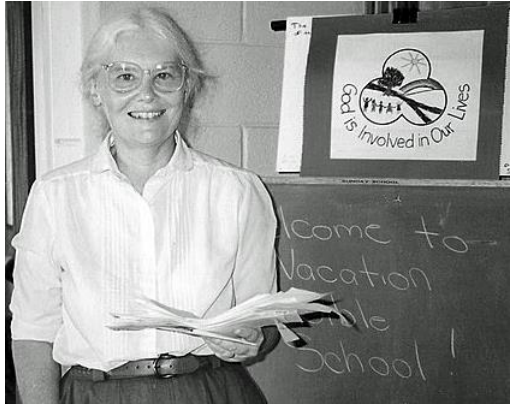
Starting the week of Weird Church's second birthday, our rag tag community of weirdos will begin to meet for a not-so regular service; a new church in an old building, following the guidance of the ancients and the practices of the church over the centuries, speaking the language of the heart of the people of Cumberland. Will we succeed? I believe we already have.

PROFILE

PATRICIA WELLS (1941- 2008)

Elizabeth Eberhart-Moffat

Lunch time was coming with the rising African heat. Moshe sat at his desk in the back row of his high school class, impatiently anticipating the delicious meal he would be cooking outside after the bell rang. Peeking under the lid of his desk, the deep saucer eyes of his prey stared back at him. It was a lucky day when he could catch a rat to cook for lunch over a small fire in the school yard. But today he relished the meal he would make from this small white owl!



Some of the other boys in his class had become aware of his hidden treasure, and as their envy slowly filtered through the classroom, one student after the other began to glance, furtively, in his direction. It was not long until the curiosity of 'Ma Thabo, was aroused. Turning the radiance of her presence toward Moshe, he knew that his secret would be short lived. She advanced slowly. Her flowing African gown rustled as she passed through the narrow aisle of desks. Surely, she would want this meal for herself. And how could he possibly deny such a gift to his beloved teacher? His determination began to falter.

“Moshe.” She said his name like a pronouncement. “Please show me what you are hiding there in your desk.” Moshe lowered his eyes and with them, drained his remaining lunchtime hopes. Cautiously, he lifted the lid of his desk as 'Ma Thabo bent down to see for herself, her bright yellow braid dropping down before him.

“What a beautiful creature!” she exclaimed, as with both pale hands she carefully lifted the owl out from its hot dark prison, holding it up for all the class to see, her smile showing the wonderment of her discovery. The room went silent with suspense as all beheld the sight of 'Ma Thabo and the white owl, whose head now rotated to assess its whereabouts.

“Moshe, she is wonderful! I would like her for myself. May I buy her from you?” Moshe searched his thoughts. He didn't suspect that he

would have a choice in the matter. Yet, nothing he could think of could match the value of the meal that his teacher now held. Where in him was the generosity of his Basothó people? Could he not be the true Mosotho he should be? Words would not form in his mouth, tears of disappointment building up behind his eyes. He shook his head in refusal to accept her offer.

To deliver these Lesotho boys through their international Cambridge exams, 'Ma Thabo had devised a motivation. She had collected great numbers of comic books to encourage them to read English and get the hang of the spoken language. These comic books had soon become hot items, traded around and avidly read by the boys. "How about this," 'Ma Thabo said to Moshe. "For this little white owl, I will give you fifty comic books." Moshe's heart began to race with surprise and new hope. Fifty comic books! Yes, that was more than he could possibly expect. And he was a hunter who could always find another meal! "Yes, 'Ma Thabo!" Moshe exclaimed, "For fifty comics you may keep the owl for yourself."

Moshe had made a great deal that impressed the other boys, their envy now reaching new heights. But all eyes widened, and cries of amazement and outrage rose as 'Ma Thabo, instead of bringing the owl back to her own desk, moved to the window to set the young owl free. "Fly back to the trees with the other birds," she commissioned as it spread its wings in flight. "Your life is precious, too."

* * *

For five years between 1976 and 1981, Patricia Wells, her husband, Harold, and their four children lived, worked, and studied in the small African country of Lesotho. They had responded to the call for a chaplain and lecturer in Theology at the National University of Lesotho and the seminary of the Lesotho Evangelical Church, a partner of The United Church of Canada, in the city of Roma. This would be an intriguing assignment for Harold, but also risky, due to the apartheid turmoil of South Africa, the country that surrounded Lesotho, not just geographically, but socially and politically. Pat, however, was excited. She saw it as an adventure for her family that could have lasting benefits for them all. Further, there was a job available for her as well. Pat would teach English, Geography, Typing, and Bible for classes of sixty teenage boys, students at Christ the King Catholic Boys High School, run by Brothers of the Sacred Heart.

Harold reports that Pat was greeted on her first morning by the

stamping of feet and the corporate hissing and whistling of the boys as she entered their classroom. But Pat was tougher than she looked, and soon she had them under control. She worked hard and creatively for them, setting an example of commitment to learning. Their devotion was quick to follow. They loved her as she loved them, giving her their own special name of ‘Ma Thabo’: Mother of Joy.

Patricia was born in Port Arthur, Ontario in 1941, the child of Marjorie Bennett and Irwin Graham, high school sweethearts. Her father was in the RCAF, stationed near Montreal. By the time of Pat's birth, he was serving in the vulnerable position of tail gunner in the bubble of an Allied bomber. He wrote to his brother: “If I don't come back, take care of that little girl of mine.” Indeed, his plane was shot down over Germany. So, for her first five years, this “bonnie blond child” was raised by her mother and doting grandparents, tender models of parental strength and resilience.

A second marriage for Pat's mother, to Cameron Carnegie, brought them to Hamilton, where Lynn was born, and the two sisters grew up together. They were very close despite their age difference. “She was the good one; I was the rebel with the tarnished halo,” Lynn confesses, “but she was very protective of me, whether I deserved it or not. I adored her.” Lynn tells of the parties held at their home for school and church friends from Young Peoples at Mt. Hamilton United, and the assessments they would make together as to who was the best of the boyfriends. Conclusions to this debate settled upon Harold Wells, a fellow teen at church, who also sang in the choir and taught children in Sunday School like Pat. Harold was one year Pat's senior at Hill Park Secondary School, and accompanied her through high school, then a three year BA in History and English at McMaster University, to become her devoted life's partner.

A succession of moves marked those early marital years. While Harold completed his MDiv at Emmanuel College, Toronto, Pat earned her Primary Specialist Certificate at teacher's college. Having completed her program and pregnant for the first time, Pat joined Harold in Alberta where he was serving a summer mission field in the hamlet of Sedalia, in ranching territory, thirty miles from the nearest sizable town with a hospital. When Pat began to hemorrhage, their decrepit borrowed car broke down somewhere between Sedalia and Oyen, and Pat miscarried their first child. Surely this event broke the hearts of this young couple, so hoping to have begun their family life together. But rather than hearts breaking, the hearts of Pat and Harold seemed to break *open* with compassion for the losses of others and

victims of all kinds. Having had their plans dramatically changed, they were now ready for what the future might gracefully offer and the unsuspected ways they would find to serve.

Back in Toronto that fall, Pat began teaching at Ossington Public School, supporting Harold through the rest of his degree program at Emmanuel and earning her permanent teaching certificate. Pat taught Kindergarten Primary, a difficult assignment, since it embraced all the six-year-olds who couldn't fit into grade one: immigrant children who couldn't speak English and children with mental or emotional difficulties. "It was a tough two years, but she handled it with skill and compassion. An inspector told her she was a 'cracker jack' teacher." (Harold, from his Eulogy for Pat)

After Harold's ordination in 1966 came a halcyon year in Edinburgh, Scotland, shared with other student couples who would become lifelong friends: June and Jim McDonald, a young Canadian doctor doing a post-doc in psychiatry; Joan and Peter Wyatt, out of Union Seminary, who now share a commitment to the excellence of *Touchstone* in these retirement years; and fellow Emmanuel student, John McTavish and wife, Marion. John would go on in later years to publish some of Pat's dramas in his edited collection, *The Mouse's Discovery: Chancel Plays for Young and Old*. "We had a great New Year's party in our flat with a bunch of Canadian students," Harold remembers. "We walked down the street singing 'O Canada' for the Centennial year."

Pat worked as a nanny for an Edinburgh family and took a course in Scottish history. She also read some theology along with Harold and worshiped in the local parish of the Church of Scotland. Hopes were high that Harold and Pat might have a second chance at becoming parents in Edinburgh, but it was after their return to Canada, while Harold was serving as minister to Wesley United Church in Jarvis, Ontario, that their hopes were fulfilled. They welcomed Peter into their lives, a beautiful seven-month old baby boy. Next came the birth of "sweet baby Sarah" on December 31, 1968. The family spent a year in Waterloo, while Harold served as Interim Dean of Studies at St. Paul's College, before his doctoral studies took them to McGill University, a home in Point Claire, Quebec, and a life shared with the community at Valois United Church. These were brimful motherhood days for Pat. While she was teaching Sunday school and working part time at the local library, along came Matthew, born on December 8, 1970 amidst a snowstorm and the FLQ crisis. Finally, during the years in Sudbury (1972-1976) while Harold served the congregation of Garson-Falconbridge United Church and Pat taught a favourite girls' class and

co-led adult education and couples club studies, an interracial adoption brought baby Andrew into their lives, and completed the Wells family.

Matthew says of his upbringing:

We were spoiled with freedom. Mom loved us children passionately for who we were, and we were all very different. There was an understood permission to explore, to create, to think and to do. But we were not free to be destructive, mean or selfish. We could listen to the music or wear the clothes we liked, play our sports, pick school subjects, jobs or books, hang out with or date whom we chose. But we couldn't throw a can out in the regular garbage, make hurtful comments, or kill bugs. We grew to care about the other. This is not our world; it is one we share with every other living thing. Our backyards and cottage property belong as much to the maples, raccoons and butterflies as they do to us . . . Mom gently, and with great devotion and attentiveness, saw each of us for who we were, and carefully, lovingly, nudged us along. It was never about her. (Matthew's contributions to Pat's Eulogy)

During their time in Lesotho, Pat did many things in addition to nurturing her family and teaching her beloved boys at Christ the King School. Harold remarks:

She wrote, singlehandedly, a whole curriculum in Bible study that was used by some of the elementary schools of Lesotho. She directed Christmas pageants in the local church, featuring real shepherd boys from the local village. She and a friend set up a large public meeting of women only, to discuss women's issues and problems in that country. That was the first 'feminist' event in Lesotho and it caused a great stir on the campus. She happily harboured refugees from South Africa in a back bedroom, where they were hiding out from police. She was hospitable to students and colleagues who were constantly in and out of our house. She readily embraced a student who, because of the financial needs of his family, moved into our home and became like a son and a big brother in our family. And she was part of an organization that provided food and blankets to destitute old folks in the local village. She saved, by artificial respiration, a little girl who had

drowned in the local swimming pool; and, for a time, visited the local hospital daily to feed and care for one of her students who had been in a serious accident. (Harold's Eulogy for Pat)

Pat took this passion into the Burlington years, the final home of the Wells family, and into the faith community of East Plains United, where Harold became minister for a time and Pat later served as a staff associate and Christian Education Director. Though teaching jobs were unavailable upon their return in 1981, Pat taught English as a Second Language (ESL) and led courses at Sheridan College. Most importantly, she helped her family readjust to North American life, and she brought a global perspective home to Canada.

Friend Joan Wyatt recalls Pat's intellectual capability and her hands-on practicality: "She was a stimulating presence, thoughtful, devoted and passionate, who did what was in front of her with hands-on commitment to doing her best." Jim Kirkwood, former Secretary of Southern Africa for the United Church, described Pat as "a moving woman who was always ahead and exploring where love and justice would lead." (by Email, June 29, 2019)

Gail Lorimer, a sister congregant and compatriot with Pat in many social justice initiatives, says that in the church and in the larger community, Pat was the catalyst and inspiration for projects that engaged other people: a mentorship program she designed for confirmation students; vacation bible school programs for which she wrote yearly plays on a biblical theme; adult studies on movies and books like Bill McKibbin's *The End of Nature*, and *Getting Started on Social Analysis in Canada*; Saturday morning congregational retreats; a prayer partnership program for Advent and Lent; congregational refugee sponsorship: families from Vietnam, then El Salvador and Guatemala. Pat challenged the congregation through the Wider Work Committee (East Plains' outreach committee) to form a group to address the need for low income housing in the community. This initiative led to the funding and development of Don Quixote Co-op Housing, offering low income and single parent families decent homes with free spaces and playgrounds for their children.

Together Pat and Gail also helped launch Burlington's Interfaith Development Education Association (IDEA) by getting the backing and endorsements of service and community groups necessary for the "mundialization" of Burlington. This United Nations movement to twin international cities—for the exchange of people and ideas and for work toward mutual peace and understanding—led to Burlington twinning with

the Japanese city of Itabashi, a relationship that has just celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. Pat and Gail were also instrumental in establishing and giving leadership in Burlington chapters of Amnesty International and Ten Days for World Development, now part of KAIROS Justice Initiatives. One might say of these two women: “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change; I am changing the things I cannot accept.”

Among Pat’s valuable gifts were her writing skills. Nurtured by a lifetime of zealous reading, Pat had a wonderful relationship with words and the ability to arrange them in ways that educated, inspired, and empowered. She wrote for the *Observer*, the Angolan Newsletter of the Division of World Outreach, and the Newsletter of the Society of Hamilton Area for International Response (SHAIR), of which she was the editor in the late 1980s. This organization focused on issues of international development and linking groups engaged in these issues. SHAIR house in Hamilton hosted speakers and seminars, featured displays of art from around the world and was a centre for international students. By the time Pat was the editor, SHAIR had hooked up with Learner Centres across Canada, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency to be hubs of education and social justice initiatives, working with schools, churches and universities. “These were the days before handy computer programs and digital design,” remembers Pamela McCarroll, then the Refugee Education Coordinator for SHAIR. “After invitations to and submissions of writers, along with her own articles, Pat had to do the layout by hand, with multiple time-consuming steps in the process.” The newsletter included substantial articles on the work of the coalitions in multiple arenas, including anti-racism, women in developing countries, the impact of US intervention in various countries, those affected by political violence, the impact of HIV and AIDS, refugees and asylum seekers, prisoners of war, and reports on speakers the group hosted, such as Rigoberta Menchu, a passionate spokesperson for the rights of indigenous peoples in her native Guatemala. Pam recalls, “I was young, and Pat was a mentor to me, always encouraging my own gifts. At our meetings, she would bring homemade soups and treats that created a sense of family. There was a special pacing about Pat that helped to settle people down. She knew what mattered and didn’t matter. She was grounded and grounding.”

The United Church benefited from Pat’s educational clarity in well-used General Council resources for congregations and confirmation classes: “Introducing The United Church of Canada,” and “Welcome to The United Church of Canada,” a newcomer’s introduction to *A New*

Creed. Perhaps her most significant contribution to deep yet accessible theology was *Jesus Means Life* (1982), co-authored with Harold. It explored Jesus from the perspective of the global south. “Pat was certainly the primary writer of this book, which was also a great success, becoming for a while a Canadian best seller,” Harold states. It articulates beautifully an understanding of the inclusive theology that helps define the United Church.

What are the key moments and influences that set the direction of our lives? How might Pat have answered that question? The strong witness of her mother and grandmother in her early life? A big sister to Lynn? Her deep love of children that developed as she first taught Sunday School at Mt. Hamilton United? The moving speaker in high school who fanned concern for neglected children and the need for adoptions? Books like *The Population Bomb* and *The Second Sex* that broke through mental parameters with exciting new ideas and possibilities? The highly political times she experienced in Quebec and Africa? The leadership of many adult education groups that helped her assess the kind of questions people have, and ways to facilitate their learning? The stimulation of friends, colleagues, and congregations in the pursuit of service and outreach? A trust in the power of natural healing that allowed her to live twenty-four years beyond her cancer diagnosis? Certainly, we know that a life in partnership with a true soulmate and friend, the joys of their children, and a bedrock Christian faith that grew outward toward the world, allowed Patricia Wells to gather many chicks under her protective wings and to know the great joy of the Jesus who brings life.

Unlike so many of us who covetously save whatever we write, Patricia Wells quickly disposed of her own body of work after she felt its use had been served. Thus, we are left mostly with an oral history. I would like to thank the following people whose conversations, email exchanges, and interviews have made this Profile possible: Dr. Harold Wells, Gail Lorimer, Lynn Ruggle, Very Rev. Dr. Lois Wilson, Barbara MacDonald Moore (former Executive Director of SHAIR), Dr. Pamela McCarroll (now Professor of Practical Theology at Emmanuel College), and the Reverends Joan Wyatt, John McTavish, and Jim Kirkwood.

Gratefully, Elizabeth Eberhart-Moffat

BOOK REVIEWS

Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology

Hyeran Kim-Cragg, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018. Pp. 171. +Vii.

Interdependence more than achieves its goals of informing theological study, ministry practice and questions of ecclesiology with well-researched postcolonial theory. It is rooted in lived experiences and practices. Hyeran Kim-Cragg is inclusive in her scope of reflective practice, including feminist postcolonial perspective on race, gender identity, disability, Christian-centrism, migration, anthropocentricity and children in worship. She explores what it means to go beyond our usual colonial borders—which often idolize independence and self-sufficiency—and instead to revalue our relationships and community as a way to personal and social transformation. She introduces a number of conversation partners: Jean Vanier, Søren Kierkegaard Kwo Pui Lan, Karl Barth, Sallie McFague, Ruth Duck, Kathleen Cahalan, Claudio Carvalhaes, which makes the book an excellent primer for practical theology.

Kim-Cragg helps us unlearn our idolatry of independence, suggesting that it is a core contributor to a weakened church. If the goal of theological inquiry is to contribute to the flourishing of life in relation to the Divine, surely our theologies must not venerate, but rather steer us from, the fallacies of independence, self-sufficiency and control. This is particularly evident in the chapter: “Beyond Adult Centred Worship.” Here Kim-Cragg begins with a discussion of how Christianity affirms the sacredness of children and therefore seeks ways to celebrate them as gifts of God. However, colonialism has led us to compartmentalize Christian education by age, keeping adult worship “done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:39-40). What would it look like to have a “radical reconsideration of the importance and place of intergenerational worship to correct this fragmentary culture” (63).

A moving example of this is the idea of children and communion as parabolic-paradox practiced theology. By involving the child in serving the bread and cup of communion we offer a rehearsal for all generations of the last shall be first. Here we teach them the cornerstone of Christian parable—the power of God to transform us with alternative visions and images that enable us to live differently (69).

Interdependence is a significant gift to the work of practical theology—expanding its integration with postcolonial theory. Both the content and the organization of the book educate on how practical

theology is learned and how it contributes to study and faith formation. It is of immense value for instructors, students and leaders imagining education, spiritual practice and liturgy differently. Kim-Cragg's use of case study is a brilliant example of the value of reflective practice in our life-long pursuit of Christian identity.

Although it is not part of the stated scope of the book, *Interdependence* will be informative for those in the church committed to The Call to Action of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (www.trc.ca, 2015) and UNDRIP (www.un.org, 2007). The explanation of unlearning that Kim-Cragg offers may give settler communities and individuals tools for unlearning colonialism and an opening to acquire wisdom from other cultures. "When certain knowledge is produced and learned over time, it becomes a gatekeeper that disallows new knowledge from being introduced. For example, the knowledge of self-sufficiency and independence is a result of the idea of individual freedom, equality and democracy. This knowledge, then is practiced socially and institutionally over time and gains political power" (25).

The scope of *Interdependence* includes overlooked groups such as queer, racialized, neuro and physically atypical persons, children and non-human species. It points to the value of post colonial theology, for it is in diversity that we grow from a partial recognition and revelation of the divine to a more fulsome one. The chapter, "*Beyond Homogenous Heterosexual Family*" is a welcome oasis in theological discourse. The listening and attentiveness in her work to this multiple-marginalized (age, race and gender/sexual identity) group is rare and valuable. However, at times it was difficult to understand the combination of identities and related justice issues. It would have been more helpful to separate sexual and gender identity from interracial families.

Finally, each chapter in *Interdependence* begins with the term *Beyond*. Kim-Cragg points out that the most important aspect of this word is that it does not assume closure. Current events cannot be understood without understanding the past. "Beyond in this sense is more than surrendering to the past time and current events. It is hope to transcend its shortcomings . . . It is hope to create a little more space to imagine that an alternative world and a different system of knowledge are possible" (8). Kim-Cragg's work accomplishes exactly that.

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***Existing Before God: Søren Kierkegaard and the Human Venture*
Paul R. Sponheim. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017. Pp.
180.**

Existing before God is the latest book by Paul R. Sponheim, professor emeritus at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. It is published in the “Mapping the Tradition” series of Fortress Press and is an introduction to Kierkegaard's thought and method via an in-depth analysis of *Sickness unto Death*. Various theologians/philosophers influenced by Kierkegaard are highlighted in the second section, moving in roughly chronological order from the mid-nineteenth into the twenty-first century. Sponheim details where the various thinkers agree or disagree, and how some misrepresent Kierkegaard. The final section attempts to reconcile the legacy of Kierkegaard's ideas with today's pluralistic society. The introduction gives the more notorious aspects of Kierkegaard's biography a light dusting before touching on Kierkegaard's use of pseudonymity and indirect communication, placing Anti-Climacus, the supposed author of *The Sickness unto Death*, in that context. Then we are off to the races.

Sponheim's analysis of *Sickness unto Death* is thorough. While complete beginners might find themselves lost in some of the denser sections (e.g., “The Pathetic and The Dialectical”), *Existing before God* provides an analysis that is introductory while not patronizing the reader. The central ideas of the book are all unpacked both lucidly and dialectically: the self in relation with itself as a “positive third,” existing before the “constituting power” (a.k.a. God as revealed through Christ); the infinite qualitative difference between the Creator and the created; the obligation on the created; and sin as the willful distortion of the relationship by the created. A large emphasis is placed on teasing out how the self becomes subjective and dialectical, knowing that the move out of despair unfolds before a constituting power and that a conscious choice must be made on how to relate to the constituting power. In the third section, when Sponheim finds reason to criticize a writer, it is often for placing too much emphasis on how a person becomes subjective and dialectical over how the person relates to the constituting power.

Kierkegaard says, in a journal entry referenced on both pages xxx and 133, that “Anti-Climacus . . . regards himself to be a Christian on an extraordinarily high level.” This notion demands further examination. The subjective experience that Kierkegaard is committed to revealing must be engaged through dialectic analysis. Sponheim writes that “Kierkegaard's use of pseudonymity was . . . a method rooted in the

content of his message” (xxviii). He handles this dynamic well where he moves between the contrasting points of departure of Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus to approach forgiveness as possible because of the infinite qualitative difference between Creator and created (66-67).

The final section of the book muses about “what gifts Kierkegaard has for our time.” Sponheim contests Varughese John’s reactionary claim that “there cannot be a proper understanding of subjectivity outside Christ and His revelation” (138). We spend the last seven pages trying to untangle the paradox of how a person can become a Christian with all the weight of Kierkegaard’s obligation, without sliding into the above claim that would make Christian faith necessary and, therefore, deny non-Christians the possibility of moving beyond despair. Sponheim ultimately lands on an appeal for the self to “rest transparently in the power that established it.” Perhaps his inability to resolve this problem is due to the subjective, paradoxical nature of Kierkegaard’s conception of becoming a Christian. On the other hand, perhaps it is because Sponheim is asking the wrong question.

Despite not wanting to make Christian faith necessary for human subjectivity, Sponheim cannot unseat the constitutive role of Christian faith for Kierkegaard’s thought, and this ties Sponheim to a conservative reading. The question for Kierkegaard was “How does one become a Christian within Christendom?” Kierkegaard lived in a society where a stale, bourgeois Christianity was absolutely hegemonic. For him, the becoming self was synonymous with the authentic Christian within, but also against, Christendom. Today what is hegemonic is something more like bourgeois individualism. Sponheim needs to ask, “How does one become the authentic Christian in today’s secular world?” A more progressive approach might be to ask, now that we are not living within a hegemonic bourgeois Christendom, what does it mean to honestly become oneself within, and perhaps against, a hegemonic bourgeois secularity? This book will be useful primarily for those looking for a gateway into existential theology.

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T.F. Torrance in Plain English

Stephen D. Morrison. Columbus, OH: Beloved Publishing, 2017. Pp. 253.

That we inhabit ecclesial landscapes populated by alluring “theologies of,” to use D. J. Hall’s phrase, in many ways signifies the often-marked disunity of the Body of Christ. Few church leaders and still fewer theologians have been able to bridge the gaps that internally divide the church. As evidenced in Stephen D. Morrison’s newest volume in his *Plain Language* series, T. F. Torrance was one of the few. Morrison, a freelance ecumenical writer and theologian, masterfully exposes Torrance’s challenging genius and grace-filled theology for the beginner (or even, presumably, the veteran).

Morrison confesses that “this book was written from one amateur to another—it is yet again *for beginners, by a beginner*” (7). Still, he offers an accessible and synthetic account of Torrance’s work without losing the power and complexity of the Scot’s thought. Torrance—a student, interpreter, and translator of Karl Barth; a prolific theologian in his own right; and Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland from 1976-1977—was broad in his scope and deep in his detail, making difficult any endeavour to summarize his work. Morrison thus chooses nine specific major facets of Torrance’s thought to give the reader a sense of his scientific, evangelical theology.

The first three chapters covering Torrance’s scientific theology, *kata physin*, and his reformulated natural theology set the epistemological tone of the book’s exposition of his work. Torrance’s emphasis on “epistemological repentance” (43)—that is, the conforming of one’s intellect to God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit—is the theological conviction which shapes his corpus. While at times Morrison’s book can seem repetitive on this point, it is precisely because of Torrance’s commitment to epistemological repentance that Morrison is so emphatic that our thought and subsequent speech about God be disciplined by the reality of revelation. This, to Torrance, involves more than changing *what* we know but, in fact, *how* we know it.

Morrison illumines several other key pillars of Torrance’s work. Among these, the “vicarious humanity” of Jesus Christ serves as the lynchpin which pulls together the latter portion of Morrison’s account. Morrison defines Torrance’s “vicarious humanity of Christ” as “the faith, obedience, worship, prayer, repentance, and life of the Son of God lived as a human being before the Father on our behalf. He fulfills our human response to the Father by perfectly doing what we cannot do: living a life

of true fellowship with God from within our sinful humanity” (157). According to Torrance, this is precisely what makes Christ’s person and work intrinsically salvific and finally inseparable; that is, the soteriological work of the Cross is not superseded or negated but *enhanced* by the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ according to the patristic principle that “what is not assumed cannot be saved.”

In taking on *our fallen humanity* (138) rather than some neutral humanity, “Jesus Christ is the true mediator for both God to humanity and as a human before God” (138-139). In this way, Morrison exposes one of Torrance’s grounding convictions: “that Jesus Christ acts at once humanward and Godward, that is, both as God *towards* humanity and as a human being *towards* God in twofold mediation” (136). The ascended Christ continues this salutary mediation, continually representative of God and humanity. Morrison, though not always explicitly, lays bare the upshot of Torrance’s theology on this score. Christ’s ongoing mediation means that our humanity is *already* sealed in Christ’s own humanity and thus already reconciled and brought fully to the triune life. This means that while chiefly accomplished on the cross, the saving event of Christ is not *uniquely* bound to the passion: it flows from his *very being*. This means that Jesus Christ *continues* to mediate for humanity to the Godhead *as human* and continues to mediate the Godhead to humanity by the Holy Spirit *as God*. This means that God did not act merely to save us *from* something (sin and death), but ultimately to save us *for* something—“union and communion with the Triune God” (211). In this way, Morrison makes it easy to discern the ecumenically irenic character of Torrance’s thought.

In sum, Morrison has done an outstanding job in proving to a reader unacquainted with T. F. Torrance that he is a theologian we cannot afford to ignore. Morrison, in an accessible-yet-faithful (and sometimes humorously folksy!) way, shows that even more than the theological ideas that Torrance developed, the posture with which he approached theology is indispensable for this post-Christendom age; for it is a posture that is humbly and graciously subordinate to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

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Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience

M. Shawn Copeland. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. Pp 160.

M. Shawn Copeland's theological reflections and research are at once devastating and emboldening. She does not hold back from telling the history of chattel slavery, social sin and social suffering. She does not hold back in proclaiming the power of Jesus, in life, through torture and death by crucifixion and his new life in resurrection. This book wonderfully weaves together practical-political history and theology. Copeland helps one understand and celebrate the flourishing of theology, biblical interpretation and social responsibility arising from the "dark and hidden wisdom" of African enslaved people in the United States. She does so with inspirational segments of theology, never allowing the reader to rest in lazy voyeurism or shallow metaphors.

Copeland begins by taking us back to the diversity of paradigms and worldviews of people who were forced to travel West to be slaves in what is called the Middle Passage. "No universal 'African' religio-cultural heritage existed (or exists)" (7). Those who survived the horror of the Middle Passage were placed in a dehumanizing economy of social evil, which Copeland defines and expands.

These people were exposed to biblical stories through direct preaching, by their masters' pastors and priests, who included promises not to seek freedom into their baptismal vows, as well as from their fellow enslaved Africans. Worship opportunities varied: some plantations banned church attendance, others insisted on it with segregated seating, others allowed slaves to listen at church windows. Some were allowed segregated worship spaces but most were punished for praying or singing at any time. Yet worship was alive in the groves of the plantations—in the dark, in the night.

For generations, the Bible was memorized and reimagined, some characters emphasized, the Hebrew stories and prophets and stories of Jesus told and retold. In the listening and in the telling, "they crafted imagery, fashioned symbols, plumbed meaning . . ." and created an "aural text" (33). We listen to the stories and songs but will never truly know the "intimate life of the enslaved peoples" because it had to be hidden (40). The language of the spirituals, she writes, is anamnestic (of the ancestors), charismatic, midrashic and apocalyptic (46).

Through her theological reflections I accepted how much I must learn. There is much suffering that is not pedagogical and to suggest so is

not only wrong and dehumanizing, it is bad theology. Spirituals do not have uncomfortable (to me) imagery—they tell the truth. They are not “too bloody” but sing about the reality that Jesus faced and that people face, both now and in history: what it is to be whipped, tortured, humiliated and killed. The concept of freedom in spirituals is never about submission. Christ’s actions were never “self abnegation but an act of signifying resistance” (25). Songs of heaven’s peace were not only about the afterlife. Freedom’s cry is for justice for today, and sung in deep confidence that Jesus, killed on the cross and raised from the dead, will also bring about freedom here on earth. Pain and violence must be faced and resisted. Those enslaved by others can having full empathy for Jesus, who was innocence tortured. They can also know God gives true consolation (34).

If we are to call ourselves Christian, we must remember. As the cross cannot be erased from our foreheads, nor can suffering be ignored or forgotten. This book is a wonderful reminder of all we have to Remember, Lament, Learn and Sing, and is well worth the read by both layperson and pastor.

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