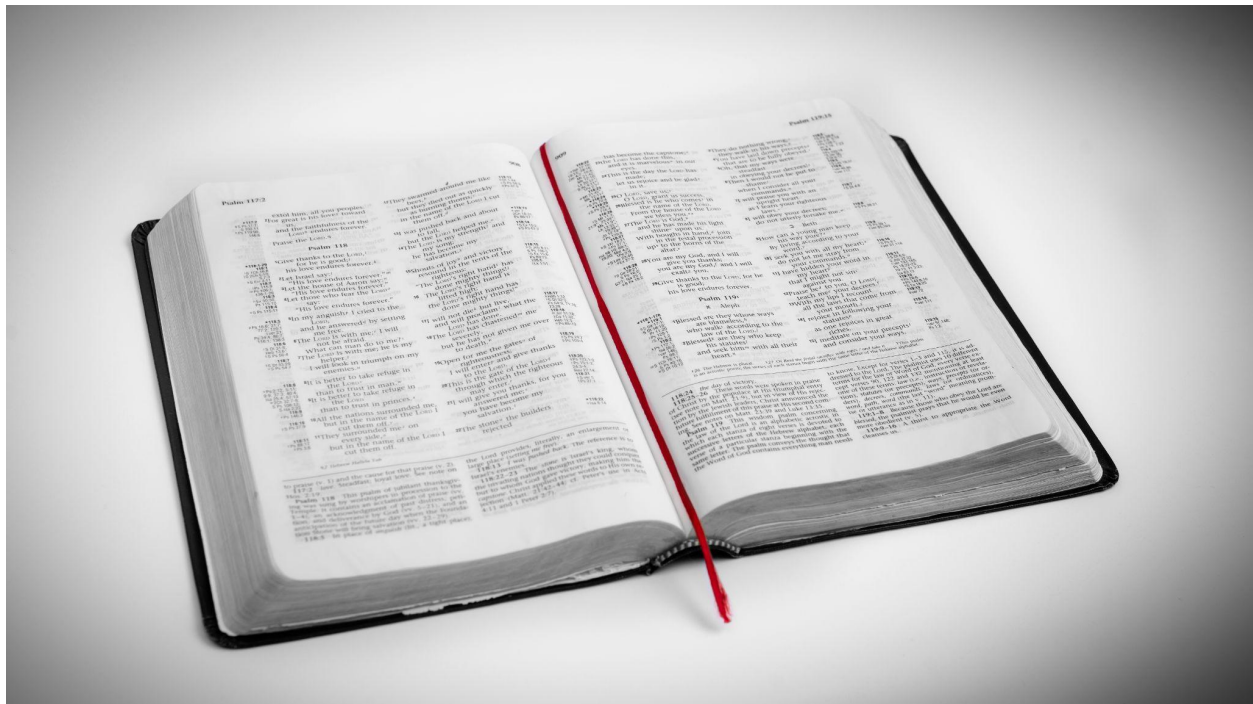




Living in Truth

... yesterday, today and forever ...

This is a **selection** of new uploads to livingintruth.ca
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Mired in Christendom but moving forward

Inside the uneasy theological symbiosis in The PCC

By Rev. Andy Cornell

Christendom died a long time ago. But the church still operates as if it were alive. I say that because – to a significant degree – most corners of the church focus primarily on the needs and desires of the existing flock. Sure, we devote significant resources to the pursuit of social and economic justice, just as the Lord commanded. But that only hits the second of the two Great Commandments. We love people, and in doing so, we believe we are demonstrating our love for God.

Trouble is, we miss the fact that we are to love God first. “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ ” – Mark 12:29-30. The Greek word we translate into “most” (NLT, ESV, NIV) can also be understood as “foremost” (NASB) or “first and most important” (Amplified.)

We demonstrate our love for God by following His commands, as enunciated clearly by the teachings of His Son, which He concluded by commanding His followers to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” – Matthew 28:19 (NIV)

One might conclude that the most important duty of the church is to make disciples. The most direct way of doing that is to witness the Gospel in words, telling others of the only way to hope and peace and the promise of eternal life. And not just a human-centric version of the Gospel but one that is traditional, historic,

evangelical, rooted in orthodoxy and spoken and demonstrated in unconditional agape love.

In a post-Christendom world, the church which is not doing that is not only not doing its job, but odds are, the Holy Spirit will not be present. And it will die. I know, harsh words. But doctrine is vitally important. And, given the above references to the commandments and the commission, it supersedes deeds.

So how are we doing?

It’s hardly a secret that mainline denominations such as The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) are not known for bold personal witness. Most of us shy away from evangelism. And the denomination to which I belong does little in the way of encouragement. In the 2025 report of the PCC’s Life and Mission Agency (LMA), the word “evangelism” appears six times (and only with reference to its mandate) and the term “Christian faith formation/discipleship” appears only once (again, only with reference to its mandate) and the yet the word “justice” appears 135 times, “reconciliation” 40 times, “inclusion” 26 times, “anti-racism” 16 times.

In response to that, two Sessions submitted overtures to General Assembly (GA) this year asking the court to direct the LMA “to develop an immediate plan to make evangelism ‘in word’ ” its priority. (Full disclosure: I am the minister of one of those congregations and those overtures were largely written by me.)

The LMA took the overtures seriously and produced a lengthy academic response. It

included a detailed discussion on the origin of the words “evangelism” and “gospel” and how they are used in scripture. LMA explored the history of evangelism from a power perspective: “one of the challenges that face Christians in today’s world is to relate the message of ‘good news’ from a position of power and privilege while employing the sacred texts from an entirely different social context.” LMA noted that the Gospel writers all wrote from the margins of society, unlike today’s believers.

LMA advocates “relational evangelism . . . a model of evangelism as face-to-face encounters, wherein people are encouraged to come closer to God by means of encouragement from a representative of the church who develops a relationship with the person and shares their own faith.” LMA cited biblical evidence that not everyone has this gift, but those who do, should be encouraged to develop it.

The author of the report made a very puzzling statement: “Despite Paul’s tendency to offer directives to his letter recipients, he never encourages them to proclaim the gospel or to seek to bring others into the community of God.” So what about 2 Corinthians 5:20 – “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.” And what about Paul’s direction in 2 Timothy 4:2 – “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season.”

Another puzzler: the author states that what we understand as the Great Commissions in Matthew and Mark “do not support a view of universal evangelism by all who are baptized as followers of Jesus.”

The LMA is creating a new staff position this year “that will support initiatives of

evangelism in the denomination to help equip and support the efforts of those called to evangelism in the form of proclamation.” While the overtures were written from the heart, LMA’s response was more from the head.

The recommendations lacked teeth:

- “That ruling elders, teaching elders, and presbyteries work diligently to identify people with the gifts for relational evangelism.
- “That congregations and presbyteries make ample use of resources within and outside the denomination to equip people for evangelism in word and deed.
- “That teaching elders be encouraged to use study leave and allowances to learn about effective and relevant evangelism.”

So I was exceedingly pleased to see a commissioner submit an additional motion that actually called for specific action:

- “That the governing boards of the three theological colleges of The Presbyterian Church in Canada be requested to review curriculum for the M. Div. degree specifically with a view to consider including a mandatory course on apologetics, designed to enable graduating students to be better equipped for effective evangelism and report back to the next General Assembly.

The writer and mover of the motion was Candice Bahadoor, the minister of Heart Lake Community Presbyterian Church. If anyone knows the vital need to go and make disciples, it’s her. Heart Lake is in Brampton, Ontario, home of the largest Sikh population outside India. Indeed, Sikhism is Brampton’s largest religion, at 25 per cent of the population, followed by Christianity at 24.7 per cent, Hinduism at 18.1 per cent and Islam with 9.1 per cent, according to Statistics Canada.

Compare that to Canada as a whole, where 53 per cent of the population identified as Christian in the 2021 census, and Sikhs/Hindus make up a combined 4.4 per cent and followers of Islam totalled 4.9 percent. Bahadoor sees a huge mission field in Brampton: “It’s an amazing opportunity to share the good news,” she told General Assembly. “It is the loving and just thing to do, yet many struggle to verbalize salvation by faith in Jesus Christ.”

Many churchgoers and even ministers struggle to put their faith in words, as 1 Peter 3:15 commands: “And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it.” And to do it with love and in one’s immediate cultural context. She found herself to be ill equipped to talk about Jesus to people of other religions or no faith life. “This is so necessary in our culture today . . . We need the skills to be able to describe our faith on the spot, to be able to reach out to others to let them know about God’s only Son who provides eternal life and the sacrifice He made on the cross. I didn’t see these teachings being incorporated within the curriculum at all.”

Although relatively fresh from Knox College seminary, she had to research additional courses.

Should seminary not have equipped her for that? One would think so.

Representatives from all three of the PCC’s seminaries – who happened to be in the Assembly Hall for their reports – were invited to weigh in. While two of the three thanked the mover for the initiative, they pointed out that the seminaries don’t have unilateral authority to create courses because they work within a partnership of seminaries from various denominations. There are regulations and it’s complicated.

“This would create more work for the deans of academics and the boards,” said Robert Hayashi, who just completed a six-year term on the Knox College board of Governors.

The sticking point for many commissioners was the word itself – apologetics. Some had no idea what it was about: “For me, and I imagine some other people here at the assembly, are not familiar with that word ‘apologetics’. For me it conveys a defensive stance, rather than a communicative or listening,” said Cathy Stewart, a minister from Guelph.

Some were uneasy about damaging relations with other faith groups: “There are other types of ways we can have these conversations that are helpful in terms of interfaith relations,” said Deb Stanbury, a minister from Hamilton. Added Amanda Currie, a minister from Regina and a past moderator of GA: “The word that really concerns me is apologetics. And particularly the context around how this additional motion came in the context of having neighbours of a variety of faiths and being concerned about our job being to convert them to Christianity. I would want to emphasize about being able to learn about how to speak our faith in respectful ways in dialogue with our neighbours.” Pluralism was in the air.

To some, the word itself is loaded. “The language of apologetics is fraught. Often for many people it involves verbal sparring and within the world of practical theology and missiology it is not as common now to use that language. ‘Witness’ would be more common,” said Ross Lockhart, dean of St. Andrew’s Hall and a professor at Vancouver School of Theology.

Robert Revington, an elder commissioner and theologian who has written on the subject, provided this primer to the court: “When we talk about apologetics . . . it’s

being able to answer the question, ‘why should I believe this is true?’ And if we as the church are here today it’s because we believe certain things are true, historical things, that in the first century there was really a man who came here and lived among us and rose from the dead and those are claims that can be defended or not defended.”

In response to suggestions from some commissioners, Bahadoor amended the motion to remove “mandatory course” and simply to ask that apologetics be incorporated into the curriculum. “Are not apologetics already part of courses?” asked Ken MacCrae, a minister who is a Canadian Forces chaplain.

Principal Clerk Victor Kim, Life and Mission Agency General Secretary Ian Ross MacDonald, and Moderator Lara Scholey put their heads together to discuss. “Yes, we believe it’s been incorporated throughout the curriculum,” the moderator told the court one minute later. The amendment failed. Shortly after, so did the original motion.

The bottom line is that hardly anyone believed this young minister on the front lines in a city far removed from Christendom who testified that her recent seminary experience did not equip her to defend and explain the faith. Most commissioners chose to believe those who resided far from the actual mission field.

Here’s my takeaways from this affair.

1. Some commissioners did accept the mover’s testimony. It’s a start, and that’s encouraging.
2. Overtures can be effective. This entire discussion stemmed from one minister’s light bulb moment at last year’s GA, in which he took stock of the imbalance between evangelism in deed and Word. That minister wrote several

drafts before presenting to it his Session and other ministers who shared his ethos.

3. Everyone behind this – the Sessions which sent the overtures, the mover and seconder of the motion and most of those who spoke in favour – appear to be on the traditional/historic/evangelical/orthodox side. And everyone who spoke against or were reluctant to get behind it are either on the liberal/progressive wing or are part of an ecumenical consortium of seminaries at a public university.
4. The glaring polarity in theology and practice within the PCC almost feels like two churches in one denomination. To me and most of the kin in my circles, the concept of apologetics is garden variety, as ubiquitous as the Gospel fundamentals and the conviction that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and that no one enters the Kingdom of Heaven except through Him. I know the word “apologetics” is anathema to some because it’s equated with street preachers and doomsayers, which are unfortunate and inaccurate stereotypes. Apologetics is actually a recognized academic subdiscipline with plenty of scholarly texts.
5. Given the above point, I am dismayed by the clear misunderstanding of the art and science of apologetics. It’s not the domain of the far-right. It’s actually Christianity 101 – it’s that basic. Which circles back to the first and foremost commandment and the Great Commission itself.

Some very reputable and established Canadian seminaries offer specific courses in apologetics. Tyndale, a private Christian university and seminary in Toronto has “THEO 0534 – Christian Apologetics,” which defends the faith and addresses classic issues such as “the existence of God, the problem of pain, the

authority of the Bible, the supremacy of Christ, creation, evolution and other religions. Students are also introduced to the impact of postmodernism in our culture.”

Of note is “WYT2620H – Introduction to Christian Apologetics: The Art and Science of Christian Persuasion” offered by Wycliffe College, an evangelical Anglican seminary, which happens to be part of the Toronto School of Theology at University of Toronto, same as Knox College.

GA also had a robust discussion on Medical Assistance in Dying (Physician Assisted Dying/Suicide.) Surprisingly, the Church Doctrine Committee presented a passionate defence of the sanctity of life with recommendations to stand against MAiD in any form and affirm the sanctity of life until natural death and to take a stand against future expansion of the current law’s application.

Some notable statements from the committee’s report:

- “We reject every teaching and practice that makes medically administered death a routine instrument of health care and places ultimate sovereignty over life and death in human hands rather than in the hands of God.”
- “Christian hope does not promise the absence of suffering in this life.”
- “The church is concerned that the normalization of MAiD may weaken commitments to palliative care, chronic disease management, mental health services, suicide prevention, and attention to the social determinants of health.”
- “The Presbyterian Church in Canada confesses Jesus Christ as Lord over life and death. Human life is a gift of God, marked by inherent dignity, held in trust, and completed in God.”

- “In life and in death, we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. Nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- “From this confession flows a clear opposition to MAiD as a response to suffering and a steadfast commitment to compassionate pastoral care for all who are affected.”

Many observers were actually expecting the committee to support MAiD. The doctrinal statement has been in the works since 2017, when GA approved a bold statement upholding the sanctity of life mirroring the 1994 statement on the issue. The 2017 statement was appropriately named “Physician Assisted Suicide” and intended as an interim response to an emerging issue as the term MAiD did not exist in 1994. It was commended to the church for study and response. Feedback was received and in 2019, the Church Doctrine Committee prepared a report with revisions to the 2017 statement. GA was cancelled in 2020, so the following year, commissioners proposed adding “Medical Assistance in Dying” to the title. This signalled a shift in doctrine.

The movement to the left continued in 2022. In response to a significant number of requests, “Physician Assisted Suicide” was dropped from the name. In 2023, commissioners directed the committee to produce a new document which “reflects the wide secular acceptance of the practice.” In its interim report to 2024 GA, the committee stated: “The committee realizes that there is a need for pastoral care and non-judgmental guidance for both patients and their families. We also need to grapple with the role of suffering in end-of-life situations and the traditionally high-view Christians have regarding the sanctity of life.” Until 2026, it appeared that the committee was moving

towards a MAiD-accommodating statement.

Pushback against the committee's pro-life stance was expected at GA 2026, and it happened right from the get-go. Commissioner Neil Ellis, a minister from Eastern Ontario, summed up the naysayers by calling it "wholly insufficient . . . I find this response to be judgmental, condemning and will cause harm." Before any supporting commissioners could speak, a motion was made to refer the issue to the Life and Mission Agency. Commissioners spoke for and against. A show of hands was not conclusive, so the moderator called for a standing vote. The referral was carried and 15 commissioners dissented.

That was followed by a motion "that LMA develop a pastoral response with helpful liturgical resources to assist ministers walking alongside those considering MAiD and their families as well as those who have chosen MAiD."

Notwithstanding the existence of a historic (1994) position, several commissioners lamented the lack of a contemporary statement. Speaking to the motion to have LMA develop a pastoral guide: "I have sympathy for those facing MAiD, but if we pass this motion we will allow ourselves to be informed more by winds of culture than the Holy Spirit," said Irwin Cunningham, a minister from the Victoria BC area.

The motion to develop a pastoral guide was carried by a show of hands and one dissent. A flurry of additional motions followed:

- That the doctrine committee produce a document for what it is to experience pain, suffering and death in the experience of being human as it relates to MAiD in the era of AI to assist the church to respond faithfully

in pastoral situations. The moderator ruled it out of order as LMA will already be aware of that.

- To determine whether the church has a desire for a fresh doctrinal statement or to adhere to the last one in 1994. The mod's ruling that it was out of order was challenged but upheld by a show of hands.
- That the doctrine committee develop a new statement that would provide new guidance to end of life care. Again, ruled out of order. The ruling was challenged but upheld by a standing vote this time – an indication of the deep division in the court.
- That the doctrine committee produce a clear statement which upholds the 1994 position, along with a pastoral response. The moderator told the court this will be the final additional motion on this issue, then she ruled it out of order.

The bottom line is that the PCC's last official statement on MAiD/physician-assisted dying in 1994 was strongly pro-life. And it still stands. Doctrinally, we have a statement upholding the sanctity of life, yet the LMA has been asked to develop guidelines which would be in contravention of that.

In his Pulitzer Prize winning third installment of the Rabbit tetralogy, John Updike noted the protagonist's middle-aged angst and unsettledness in juxtaposition to his middle-American wealth. "Rabbit is rich," he concluded in the opening pages. I consider Updike the 20th century version of Charles Dickens. Whether it was Victorian England or Postwar America, both authors documented the spirit of the times.

So when Peter Bush, the convenor of the Special Committee Regarding a National Framework for the Use of Property, told

the Assembly that “many congregations in the PCC are real estate rich,” it was a defining statement.

Like Rabbit, many PCC congregations are unsettled and have an uncertain future. Against the continuing backdrop of declining membership and congregations, the PCC is growing richer financially. A congregation in, or in close proximity to, a large urban area may be dwindling in souls while occupying real estate worth several million dollars. Can these legacy gifts be used in new ways to support the mission of the church? If a congregation no longer has the operating revenue to carry on, can the real estate be leveraged with secular partners to support its mission, perhaps in a new way?

“In the words of Bob the Builder, ‘Let’s get to work’”, Bush quipped as he donned a yellow hard hat.

Arising from the report of the Narratives of Hope and Possibility Working Group, the committee was set forth by commissioners in 2025 to develop a “national framework for the denomination’s use of property” which includes a “discernment path” and being mindful of stewardship, communication with courts and agencies of the church, including the Trustee Board and the Assembly Council – all within governing legislation and polity.

Extraordinary use of property is not just a local decision. It has extraordinary potential for vital mission. “The selling of church property to developers who then turn real estate into high-end condos, that time is over,” Bush told the Assembly. Amen.

The potential to re-imagine and develop property to address homelessness and community needs – while providing continued life for a worship community –

is nothing short of manna from heaven. Such initiatives have already happened and others are in the works.

Commissioners approved 24 Guiding Principles. Among them is that congregations will drive the process, not the denomination. This grassroots approach allows the church on the frontlines – who know the needs best and are capable of discerning divine guidance – to be supported by presbyteries, which can access guidance and resources from the denomination.

(I see an interesting juxtaposition here with the apologetics issue, in which a local minister’s clarion call for support was largely dismissed by denominational and seminar leaders and much of the court.)

Commissioners also approved implementation procedures to fund and support congregations as they undergo a three-phase site (re)development exploration process: first, a feasibility study, followed by requests for proposals, then the negotiation of “a partnership between the congregation/presbytery and a developer, including legal fees to ensure the needs of the congregation/presbytery are met and its interests are protected.” Funding of \$1 million annually will be available as “grants to congregations, ministries, and/or presbyteries to support work in assessing potential for property (re)developments” with the expectation that typical investment will be no more than \$150,000 per project. Staffing in the New and Renewing Ministry Fund will grow from 1.1 full-time equivalent to a maximum of 3.5 FTE positions.

Congregations are being encouraged to “consult with indigenous peoples and consider giving land back” in cases of dissolution and amalgamation.

While mission involving the use of real estate will naturally skew towards care for the needy, my hope is that it will also incorporate evangelism of Word (designed to lead the soul to salvation). Time will tell whether missions will also, somehow, include that second, primary component. This framework is a bold step out of Christendom thinking and practice.

On a personal note, the congregation to which I am called acquired a 100-acre farm during amalgamation a few years ago. It was recently sold, providing the congregation with a sizable seven-figure legacy, held in trust. Session named the trust after the elder and his wife who in 1953 donated the land and farmhouse to their congregation. Thomas and Mary Prescott had a heart for retired farmers, so the house was converted to a retirement home for farm workers. The home was retired in the mid 1960s, when standards changed and rest homes and long-term care became the norm. Income from the trust is just starting to flow. Once established, my hope is that Session, as legal trustees, will have the vision and fortitude to commit as much of the income as possible to mission in Word as well as deeds.

I attended part of GA 2026 in person as one of two co-chaplains of the GA prayer room. This was the second year that Renewal Fellowship has partnered with the General Assembly Office to organize and staff the room. My suggested overarching prayer and mission for the Prayer Room was this: "God's will be done." God's will in the minds of progressives and liberals will likely differ from that of those on the other side of the room. And so will our prayers. But if we can just agree to seek God's will, who can argue?

As noted, GA sometimes felt like two different nations in the belly of a single state. That's a clear reference not only to Esau and Jacob in Rebekah, but also Anglophones and Francophones in Canada, the five nations which make up the United Kingdom, and the United States prior to and during the Civil War. All of these things were either God's will or allowed by Him. Uneasy tension is the story of our lives. Politically and philosophically, we are more polarized than ever. God is allowing this to happen.

Outside observers to GA might assume, given the official program and presentations from denominational leaders and agencies, that the PCC is uniformly progressive or liberal in its theological outlook, not just inclusive but affirming of non-binary, non-heteronormative views. They'd be correct in one way, because the PCC is officially affirming. But official does not mean we all accept it. There remains a very healthy subset within the PCC which maintains orthodoxy. Most are quietly going about their business. A few are more declarative. Some actually desire to return to doctrinal orthodoxy, although with an inclusive mindset, fully cognizant of the harm done by shunning and excluding those who don't share the same theology and practice.

Paul tells us to cast out non-believers; don't even dine with them. Practised literally, no conservative would remain in the PCC. I've attended every GA since 2013, sometimes as a commissioner but mostly as an observer. I've dined with people who are far apart from me, theologically. As the executive director of Renewal Fellowship, I am yesterday's man to many. I still wrestle with the memory of an elder in a same gender marriage who cornered me at a GA a few years ago and asked me, "Do you think I should divorce my wife?" She was right in

my face and I didn't have an immediate answer. In retrospect, I should have replied, "That's not my call or a human decision; that's up to the Holy Spirit."

Christ taught us to feed the hungry, care for the sick and tend to the lonely and brokenhearted. He also dedicated much time to teaching the Father's curricula. Much of it was focused on correction of false teaching and interpretation. He was passionate about the need for doctrinal accuracy. The Lord was visibly angry with those who refused to put their selfish ways to one side and submit to the Father's will.

Correct doctrine is essential. Theology is vital. This is what the Lord preached and it gives me encouragement to remain in the PCC as a witness. It's why we pinned a bold new statement to the top of the RF home page:

Welcome to Renewal! Our bold and audacious vision is for The Presbyterian Church in Canada and its congregations to be restored to Biblical orthodoxy and be revived by The Holy Spirit.

- *We stand against doctrinal drift.*
- *We encourage and support kindred souls.*
- *We are open to conversations with all others.*
- *We speak the truth in love.*

And we're not going away. Clearly there is a need and a demand. Just this week, RF

received two substantial financial gifts – one from a congregation and the other from an individual. Both are committed to the PCC and its renewal back to orthodoxy. That puts wind in our sails.

Back to GA. Despite the occasional cold shoulder or refusal to meet my glance, for the most part the two nations are collegial. It reminds me of the LMA's push for "relational evangelism" in which we witness our faith in the context of a friendship, partnership or some sort of tangible connection. It's like Paul planting the seeds, Apollos watering them and then allowing the Holy Spirit to do the rest.

This is why I attend GA in person versus livestream even when I am not a commissioner. Besides, being there in the flesh is like watching a sports event in the stadium or arena: you get a sense of the vibe, the energy. At home, you see and hear more of the details because there are fewer distractions. In an ideal world, you'd attend in person but then watch the livestream later to pick up what you miss.

So while Christendom thinking and practices continue in many places, there are encouraging signs that the paradigm is shifting.

Rev. Andy Cornell is the Executive Director of the Renewal Fellowship, and the minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Dresden, Ontario.

Living in King Herod's world today

Scripture won't take away the tears, but it helps us understand and live

By Rev. Jim Statham

Just as shock and grief from the senseless murders in Tumbler Ridge were

fading from the national consciousness, Canadians were jarred by another disturbing revelation.

Police allege a 15-year-old girl in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia and a 14-year-old boy from Rivers, Manitoba were discussing potential attacks on their schools. The Online conversation was flagged by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Interpol and shared with the RCMP. The pair began discussing their plans online just 10 days after the Tumbler Ridge mass shooting, police say. The boy was charged with uttering threats. The girl faces charges including conspiracy to commit murder and uttering threats to cause death. Only one month previously, six children and two adults were killed in a mass shooting at a high school and the shooter's home in Tumbler Ridge, B.C. Shock and grief invaded the hearts of all Canadians.

People outside the church and within the church are falling back on the 'whats?' and 'whys?' People are casting about for credible answers in hopes of settling troubled spirits and drying tears.

By now, Christmas is perhaps a distant memory. But can we remind ourselves that the beautiful story of the birth of our Saviour is also soiled with the upsetting news of the murder of innocent children? King Herod murdered all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Right from my Sunday School days it has been a blot on the Christmas story. But now I know it was an inevitable part of it. Especially these days we need to know the whole story. The creeping darkness and unsettling times we lived through in 2025 have come too soon in Tumbler Ridge. We need encouragement. We need the whole story. We want to understand. So now, where did I put my Bible?

If we let Scripture illuminate and guide our life experiences we will be reminded that God is at work in his creation in spite of its evil, sin and suffering. We especially need to know this today. We read that Jesus

was born into this very same world! The murders in Bethlehem illustrate the broken world Christ came to save. It's not a welcome part of the Christmas story but, like the horror of the crucifixion, it remains part of the whole story. God is at work among us. Don't give up even though you may struggle and suffer because of the way life is.

But this all begs a foundational question: how did evil, sin and suffering arrive in a creation made by a purposeful and loving God? Genesis 1:31 tells us that "God was pleased with what he had made." But by Genesis 4, Cain murders his innocent brother Abel. Was the killing of Abel an inevitable part of the creation story? Yes.

This is the world we too have been born into. Abel is only the first innocent person to die. God permitted and allowed it then as he does today. Life here is a mix of contrasting good and evil, joy and sadness. Murder is right there at the birth of our world and right there at the birth and death of our Saviour. This is what this world is like, as if we need to be reminded. But we do need reminding especially as the likes of King Herod are still with us: Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Muammar Gaddafi and now Putin.

Gaddafi was a Herod to his Libyan people and a disrupter of world stability and peace so much so that Canada along with many other countries broke off diplomatic relations. Around 2000, Canada and other countries restored those relations. The Libyan embassy in Ottawa hosted a formal reception to mark the restoration. I was minister of Grace Presbyterian church Ottawa at the time and through an unusual but understandable circumstance I received a formal invitation. Should I go? Do I want to go and identify with his corrupt and evil regime? I went. I wanted to go as an identifiable Christian so I wore my collar. There were big pictures of

Gaddafi and a sumptuous banquet table the centre of which was a whole roast lamb. Did I fit in among the 30 or so mostly oil executives, investors and engineers all looking for a slice of the pie? No. I stuck out. What to do? I remembered that all of north Africa in the early centuries of Christianity was predominantly Christian and remained so until the Muslim invasion. Augustine himself came from Hippo on the coast. So I pointedly asked one of the embassy dignitaries, "How is the church doing in Libya? (i.e. under Gaddafi's evil regime) His hesitating response was, "Ah... yes... fine.... we have a church in Tripoli." I asked the same question of the Cuban delegation and got roughly the same kind of answer.

The foundational question then becomes: how did evil and suffering intrude into God's good creation? The answer: because Adam and Eve had a choice. (Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:1-2) Satan/the snake deceived her so that she chose to want to know good and evil (or 'everything', or 'bad' as some translations put it). But God never built us to be able to know everything and especially to be able to handle evil. Only God can. We are drawn to it as well for we have inherited Adam and Eve's ability to choose – and choose it we do! Not surprisingly, like moths to a summer porch light, it batters us. We are drawn to it like gossip over the backyard fence, or vicariously on cable TV, Netflix, etc. On social media it is especially addictive for the vulnerable. Portrayals of sin and evil in the media help sell the advertiser's products. Studies have shown that these portrayals increase our screen time and therefore ratings and profits. The old newspaper headline adage "if it bleeds it leads" works. Also interesting is that the recently announced Oxford University word of 2025 is "rage-bait". It describes what occurs when news media deliberately run a story that

angers us. We stay tuned longer. Ratings and profits go up.

The obvious question we will now want to ask is: why did God give Adam and Eve the ability to choose if he knew we would so often choose poorly? Why? Because God wants us to freely choose to know and love him and love can't be demanded or coerced. If love is not freely given it's not love. Evil and sin and the suffering they cause have entered creation through the necessity of choice. Adam and Eve had to have free will to love and obey God or not. Satan, who is present at creation, attacks us through our poor choices. He wants our attention on him and not on our Saviour Jesus – and he is getting it.

A fourth question then arises: did God himself have choices at creation? Would we have a perfect world if God did not give us free wills so as to make choices? No. We would be drones living in a neutral universe. There would be no love and no hate as one presumes and reveals the other. How would we know to avoid hate if we did not know love's beauty? Without darkness would we know or appreciate light? Nature in fact tells us darkness is essential to life. Creation gives us good bugs, bad bugs, good snakes, bad snakes, nutritious plants, poisonous plants, etc. Being sick on occasion draws me to appreciate good health. It seems contrasts are an important part of life. Would I feel fully alive without a few bad days? We all love music, but treble and bass by themselves are discordant. Blend them and we have harmony! Falsity and lies make me seek the truth, love and life I find in Jesus. Also, if there is no hell, as a reservoir for people with unresolved sin, then heaven automatically becomes a bland meaningless place for everybody and anybody. Life can't be painted in just one colour!

At creation we were given choice and choice produces life's sometimes dark and painful contrasts. It has produced apart from the beauty, love, life and good it was meant to produce when we choose to live life the way God intended, the likes of King Herod. Saddam Hussein was also another Herod to his people. When I was attending the Libyan embassy reception there was another man who, like me, did not fit. No one was talking to him and he was looking over at me, also standing by myself. I went over and introduced myself. We became friends and I often took Sabih out for coffee. I heard his story and I told him of Jesus. He was an Iraqi Muslim professor educated in Britain. He had taught in several universities along the Mediterranean coast of Africa. For this reason he was a threat to Saddam's regime and was imprisoned and tortured. He and his family came to Ottawa as refugees. On numerous occasions he came to my church. Once when he was leaving he put his fist over his heart, looked me in the eye and said, "I feel love when I come here!" Contrast! Islam is loveless. It's all about obeying. It's darkness. Jesus is light and love. Sabih felt the contrast with the religion he was born into. Life is not monochrome.

There are then three sources of life's brokenness and suffering:

1. When we make poor/sinful/ignorant choices.
2. When others make these choices and sin against us or others as at Tumbler Ridge.
3. We now must live in an imperfect and fallen creation that does not fully reflect God's original intention: apart from its beauty, order and majesty there are now accidents, diseases, floods and volcanoes, etc. (Genesis 3: 16-19 illustrates this)

And yet, God is very much at work restoring life and purpose to a sinful

humanity and to his now imperfect and fallen creation. What has God done? He has twice acted strategically to overcome the often terrible results of the necessity of choice:

God instituted the necessity of death, just as he promised Eve he would have to do if she chose to know evil: ". . . if you do you will die. . ." (Genesis 2:17).

1. As a consequence, every living thing on earth dies. We humans have to die in this body so we can be reborn in a body that can withstand the heavenly presence of God's awesome holiness. Creation itself is also subject to death but a new earth is promised (Revelation 21). We are invited to begin to be a new creation through Christ who "makes all things new" and it can begin even today if it has not already begun for you. (ie: Acts 3:19; 2 Corinthians 5:17)
2. God came himself as baby Jesus at Bethlehem so that on the cross he could take responsibility for our inability to love and obey God. Choice in our lives often leads us to sin and our sin and God's holiness cannot meet. Jesus lived the perfect sin-free life we cannot live and died on the cross in our place so that one day we can stand in the presence of God. Only Jesus can handle the world's evil and our sin. We were never made to be able to. When we choose to follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord we are promised new life today and a resurrection into an eternal life in God's holy presence. To be fully alive today we need the whole story. Scripture helps us understand it and live it – but won't take away today's tears.

Jim Statham is a retired minister of the PCC living in Peachland, BC.

Courageous leadership: faith over fear

God may not give detailed plans, but He does provide promise and presence

By Jodi Rich

Dear Friends in Christ, leadership often brings us into moments where we are asked to move forward without having everything figured out. We are invited to make decisions that carry weight, to step into conversations that feel uncomfortable, and to take responsibility in ways that stretch us. In those moments, fear can quietly show up. Not always in obvious ways. Sometimes it looks like hesitation. Sometimes it feels like overthinking. Sometimes it sounds like the voice in our head asking, "What if I get this wrong?"

Faith invites us into something different. As followers of Christ, we are not called to lead without fear. We are called to lead with faith present alongside it. Faith gives us something steady to stand on, even when the path ahead feels uncertain.

Faith as the Foundation of Courage

When we look at Scripture, we see that courage is not rooted in certainty. It is rooted in trust.

Joshua was given the responsibility of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land after Moses' death. It was a moment filled with expectation and uncertainty. God's words to him were simple and direct: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9) Joshua was not given a detailed plan. He was given a promise. God's presence would go with him. That same promise is available to us. Courage

in leadership begins when we remember that we are not carrying it alone.

What Fear Can Look Like in Leadership

Fear does not always feel dramatic. More often, it shows up quietly. It can look like avoiding a difficult conversation. It can feel like waiting for more certainty before making a decision. It can show up as overthinking, trying to work through every possible outcome before taking a step forward.

On the surface, these responses can seem thoughtful and responsible. At times, they are. And over time, they can also keep us stuck. We can find ourselves waiting for a level of clarity that never fully comes.

Fear rarely announces itself. It simply slows us down, causes us to hesitate and quietly shapes our decisions.

Choosing Faith in Real Leadership Moments

Courageous leadership rarely feels bold in the moment. More often, it feels uncertain, uncomfortable and deeply human. I remember sitting with decisions that carried real weight. Decisions that affected people, direction and outcomes. My instinct was to think my way through them, to analyze, to try to reach a point where I felt completely certain before moving forward.

There is value in thinking things through carefully. And there are moments when that approach reaches its limit. There were times when no amount of analysis

brought the clarity I was looking for. The more I tried to think my way through it, the more pressure I felt. What I began to learn in those moments was the importance of stepping away, even briefly, and bringing the decision to God in prayer.

Clarity did not always come as immediate answers. What often emerged instead was a sense of steadiness. A quiet confidence to take the next step. A reminder that I was not carrying the responsibility alone.

I see this same experience in the leaders I now support. We talk through complex situations, explore options, and arrive at a thoughtful next step. Even then, there can still be hesitation.

In those moments, I encourage them to pause before acting and bring that decision to God. To ask for peace. To ask for guidance. And then to move forward with trust.

Courage in leadership is not about removing uncertainty. It is about learning to move forward with faith, even when uncertainty remains.

Practical Ways to Lead with Courage and Faith

Courage can feel like something we either have or we do not. In reality, it is something we need to practice.

- *Anchor yourself in God's Word.* When fear begins to rise, returning to Scripture brings us back to truth. When fear arises, turn to verses such as Isaiah 41:10: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."
- *Seek God's wisdom through prayer.* Leadership often requires decisions that carry weight. Prayer allows us to move forward with clarity rather than

pressure. James 1:5 reminds us: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

- *Take the next faithful step.* We are not always shown the full path, though we are always invited to take the next step with trust. As Proverbs 3:5-6 encourages us: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."

Leading Others Through Fear

Leadership does not happen in isolation. The way we show up impacts those around us. When leaders choose faith over fear, it creates space for others to do the same. People are often watching more than we realize. They notice how we respond under pressure. They notice whether we rush or pause. They notice whether we lead from anxiety or from trust.

Simple actions make a difference:

- Listening with care when others feel uncertain
- Speaking encouragement when confidence feels low
- Remaining steady, even when situations feel unsettled

Courage, when rooted in faith, has a quiet way of spreading.

A Moment for Reflection

"God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind." (2 Timothy 1:7) Fear may show up, but it does not define us. Through God's Spirit, we are equipped to lead with strength, love, and clarity.

As you consider your own leadership, take a quiet moment to reflect:

- Where might fear be influencing my leadership right now?
- What would it look like to lead from faith in this situation?
- What is one step I feel called to take, trusting that God will meet me there?

Courage grows when we take even one step forward in faith.

Closing Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,
Thank You for walking with us in every moment of leadership. When fear rises,

help us to turn toward You with trust. Grant us wisdom in our decisions, peace in our hearts, and courage to take the next step. May our leadership reflect Your presence, Your love, and Your faithfulness.
Amen.

Jodi Rich is a Leadership and Team Development Coach who works with individuals and organizations to strengthen clarity, trust, and healthy communication.

Channels clicks with a new audience

Digital generation is invited to ‘tune in’ as magazine is rebirthed

Rev. Robin Ross

What do you do when a high-quality magazine stops being published? How do you ensure that the contents continue to be available? These were questions facing the leadership of The Renewal Fellowship within the Presbyterian Church in Canada (RF) last year, nearly 20 years after *Channels* ceased publication in 2006.

First, some background. The Renewal Fellowship was founded in May 1982, and during the next year, plans were made to begin a magazine to reassure isolated and sometimes discouraged Presbyterians in Canada who wanted renewal that they were not alone. Word associations with media, communication, and television channels resonated with the old hymn, “Channels only, blessed Master”, and suggested the name *Channels*. And so, *Channels* – intended to be an instrument of blessing for The Presbyterian Church in Canada – debuted in the fall of 1983.

Over the next 23 years, some 66 issues were published. *Channels* succeeded in placing the Renewal Fellowship within a broader national and international context. Publishing articles written by internationally known authors such as Eugene Peterson, James I. Packer, Michael Green, Darrell Johnson, and John G. Stackhouse Jr. helped members of RF to realize that they were a part of a much wider movement.

The high quality of this magazine has long been recognized, but only recently did it prompt a desire on the part of current RF Executive Director, Rev. Andy Cornell, to make a digital archive of every issue: the contents were too valuable to be simply lost to the world. So, beginning in February 2025 with some experimental processing, and then bearing down with more effort from September to mid-February 2026, I managed to scan over 600 articles to PDF. Then I converted them to text and posted them on channelsmagazine.ca. Each article is presented in text format, and at the

bottom, a searchable, downloadable PDF copy of the issue opens at the page where the article originally appeared. The challenge of the job came from the magazine's two-column format, interspersed with pictures and pullquote blocks: the converted text was often quite jumbled, and needed to be reassembled in order. It was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, and each article was strangely rewarding to complete. For me, it was a labour of love. On six recent days in April, over 100 articles were accessed online each day, as a testimony to their enduring value.

During this lengthy process, I was amazed at the variety of articles that presented vignettes of the issues that Presbyterians were dealing with during those years. The editor for the first 16 years was J.H. (Hans) Kouwenberg, minister at Prince George BC and later at Abbotsford BC, and the managing editor was Dal Schindell, an elder at Fairview Church, Vancouver BC. During the digitization process, and knowing that Dal worked at Regent College in Vancouver, I observed that all of the internationally known authors that I listed above were identified as professors or visiting lecturers there. And so I figured that Dal undoubtedly took advantage of his position in Regent College to just walk down the hall to their offices and ask if he could publish an article from their upcoming book, or an article that they had written for another publication. Many such articles found their way into *Channels*.

I became keen to learn more about Dal's contribution to *Channels* publication history, but unfortunately, he passed away in August 2019. So, in January this year I arranged to interview his wife Kit. This turned out to be both informative and interesting! I learned, for example, that Dal was Regent College's Instructor in Christianity and Art for 30 years. He was

also their Director of Publications, and as the Managing Editor and Art Director of *Crux*, Regent College's publication, he was eminently skilled to design and publish *Channels*. After RF came into being in 1982, Dal phoned Rev. A. Donald MacLeod, the founder of RF and then Associate Minister at Knox Presbyterian Church in Toronto, offering to produce a magazine for the fledgling organization. *Channels* was his idea, and he was the driving force behind it. All 66 issues were designed and produced by Dal – the true "hero" of *Channels*. Kit remembers how Dal would stretch out on the floor in their living room, pasting the typeset text onto pages, getting it ready for offset printing. Dal knew a lot of people, and he was good at asking them to write for *Channels*. Especially after the RF Annual Meetings and Renewal Days, he would track down the speakers and get them to write articles for *Channels*. Dal also served for 13 years on the RF Board, including four years as Chair. Kit says that she and Dal had deep love and respect for Donald and Judy MacLeod. They were unendingly generous, hospitable, and committed.

I learned a great deal about the story of RF thanks to historical articles by Donald MacLeod. If you are unfamiliar with *Channels*, I would recommend that you read an article that Donald MacLeod wrote on the 20th anniversary of the first issue, "Looking Back Over Twenty Years of *Channels*", which serves as an introduction to the scope of topics that had been covered over the course of its publication to that point. Another article is "'Good-bye' is Never Easy", a retrospective on the events that led up to the birth of RF. A fuller description of the pivotal meeting at the Skyline Hotel near Malton Airport is to be found in "A Twenty-fifth Anniversary: the Silver Jubilee of October 17, 1966". Although many of the articles are dated material, such as stories on RF Annual Meetings,

the pictures and information have historical significance. The website offers 30 category searches, such as sexuality, health, and youth, as well as author searches, such as Eugene Peterson, James I. Packer, W. Stanford Reid, as John Vissers.

One consistent feature of the magazine was the book reviews, of which two or three appeared in each magazine, for a total of 123. A surprising and pleasant feature that I enjoyed was the inclusion of 34 cartoons, entitled "Beyond Belief", by

Roger Judd, which poked fun at the foibles of clergy and laity alike.

It is to be hoped that the digitization of the *Channels* magazines will extend their influence into a new generation.

Rev. Robin Ross is a retired Presbyterian minister living in Mission, British Columbia, with his wife, Evelyn. They have three children and six grandchildren. Robin is also the Renewal Fellowship webmaster and has edited the PresbyCan Daily Devotional since 1996.

Lessons from the Korean diaspora

Han-Ca congregations learn to belong without losing themselves

By Rev. Dr. Hojin Ahn

What does it mean to belong — and not belong — at the same time? That question quietly shapes immigrant life, but it presses even more deeply into the soul of immigrant churches. For Korean diaspora churches in Canada, this tension is not theoretical, abstract, or merely sociological. It is lived every Sunday — in the choice of language for worship, in generational misunderstandings, in denominational debates, in theological controversy and in the silent prayers of parents hoping their children will not drift away.

This is a story about paradox. More precisely, it is a story about learning to live inside paradox without collapsing into fragmentation. It is the story of how Korean Presbyterian churches in Canada have learned to live between two powerful forces — what I describe as a centrifugal force, the outward push to preserve identity, and a centripetal force, the inward pull toward assimilation and integration. And it is the story of what happens when

those forces collide inside a denomination wrestling with secularization, sexuality, institutional authority and cultural change. This is not merely sociology; it is theology unfolding in history.

The Immigrant Church: Pilgrim or Settler?

For decades, immigrant theology has portrayed diaspora communities as pilgrims — strangers at the margins, sojourners between worlds. The imagery is biblical and deeply compelling: Abraham leaving Ur, Israel wandering through the wilderness, exiles weeping by Babylon's rivers, the early church calling itself "aliens and strangers." Even John Calvin described the Christian life itself as a pilgrimage toward the heavenly kingdom.

Within that framework, Korean immigrant churches were interpreted as borderland communities — spiritually creative precisely because they existed in liminal space. Theologians like Sang Hyun Lee emphasized that immigrant identity,

situated at the “frontier” between cultures, carried unique theological potential.

There is real truth here. Yet something crucial was missing. Immigrants do not only wander; they eventually settle. They purchase buildings, organize presbyteries, send children to universities, serve on denominational committees and shape institutions. Pilgrims, over time, become settlers. And once pilgrims settle, the theological imagination must expand.

Earlier models of immigrant theology sometimes treated marginality as if it were a permanent spiritual requirement — as though authenticity depended upon remaining outside the center. But immigrant churches inevitably develop dual identities: spiritually oriented toward the kingdom as pilgrims, yet socially embedded as settlers within concrete institutions. That dual identity is not a contradiction; it is the birthplace of paradox.

Centrifugal and centripetal: the two forces within

To understand this dynamic, imagine two invisible forces operating within immigrant churches. The centrifugal force pushes outward. It seeks to preserve language, tradition, theological inheritance, and cultural memory. It whispers: keep worship in Korean; teach children their history; guard evangelical faith; remember where you came from. It protects identity. The centripetal force, by contrast, pulls inward toward the center. It urges participation in mainstream denominational life, integration into national structures and contribution to broader society. It encourages second-generation leaders to attend denominational seminaries, learn institutional polity, and shape the larger church. It seeks belonging. These forces

are not enemies. They are tensions that must be negotiated.

Healthy immigrant identity is not achieved by choosing one force over the other, but by learning to inhabit both. This negotiation — neither isolation nor surrender — is what I call paradoxical coexistence.

From ghetto to gateway: why Korean churches joined the PCC

The historical background deepens the paradox. Canadian Presbyterian missionaries played significant roles in establishing Presbyterianism in Korea in the late nineteenth century. The Gospel that transformed Korean church history came, in part, through Canadian mission networks. Nearly a century later, Korean immigrants arrived in Canada and many affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). Yet this affiliation was far from smooth. Language barriers hindered participation; cultural misunderstandings generated suspicion; some white-majority presbyteries feared fragmentation. Still, Korean churches persisted. They desired not isolation, but participation.

By the 1990s, Eastern and Western HanCa presbyteries were formed within the PCC — bilingual structures allowing Korean congregations to function within Presbyterian polity while maintaining linguistic and cultural identity. This was not separation from the denomination; nor was it full assimilation. It was institutional paradox. The results were transformative. Korean pastors began attending presbytery meetings in large numbers. Elders were trained in polity. Women were ordained. Second-generation ministers emerged. Korean leaders eventually served in denominational roles of influence. A structure once feared as a ghetto became a gateway to participation.

Centrifugal preservation had enabled centripetal integration.

Selective Integration: Women's Ordination

The ordination of women within HanCa presbyteries illustrates how paradoxical coexistence functions constructively. Though many Korean churches historically leaned conservative, the HanCa presbyteries implemented women's ordination in alignment with PCC polity. The first woman pastor was ordained in 1998; within a decade, women elders and ministers were serving actively, and a woman became Moderator of the Eastern Han-Ca presbytery.

This development did not represent theological collapse. Rather, it showed selective integration — cultural patriarchy was challenged while evangelical commitments remained intact. Korean immigrant churches proved capable of reform without surrender. They were not reactionary enclaves; they were discerning communities negotiating faithfulness within institutional belonging.

The Collision: LGBTQ Ordination

If women's ordination represented constructive adaptation, the debate over LGBTQ ordination exposed the limits of assimilation. As Canadian society secularized and major Protestant denominations embraced same-sex marriage and LGBTQ ordination, the PCC moved through extended processes of listening and policy change, culminating in decisions facilitating LGBTQ ordination.

For Korean presbyteries, the impact was seismic. Their opposition was not simply cultural conservatism; it was grounded in biblical interpretation and theological conviction. At General Assemblies in 2017 and 2019, Korean representatives insisted

upon the authority of Scripture and the protection of conscience.

They were accused of sexism and cultural backwardness — despite having already ordained women. The stereotype collapsed under scrutiny. Yet the most surprising development was this: they did not withdraw. “Rather than capitulate or separate, they chose to remain — and to dissent.”

Why stay?

Observers expected mass departure. That did not occur. Although some congregations left and painful fractures followed, the majority of HanCa churches remained within the PCC.

Why would conservative immigrant churches remain inside a progressive denomination? The reasons were layered. The PCC preserved freedom-of-conscience provisions allowing ministers to abstain from participating in LGBTQ ordinations. Korean leaders believed they could remain evangelical within the denomination. The historical memory of Canadian mission to Korea weighed heavily. Remaining allowed Korean presbyteries to advocate for other conservative and minority congregations. And perhaps most importantly, Korean Christians often accept living within politically progressive societies without theological surrender. They can distinguish between civic coexistence and ecclesial conviction. They chose tension over isolation.

The Pain and the Shadow

Paradoxical coexistence is not romantic. It carries real cost. Congregations split. Friendships dissolved. Some churches misinterpreted others as compromised.

Others were accused of bigotry.
Membership declined.

Meanwhile, another danger emerged — not from progressive theology but from institutional pragmatism. As immigrant churches matured, some drifted toward managerial models of success. Attendance and offerings became metrics of worth. Pastors were pressured like corporate executives. Leadership anxiety intensified. In such moments, conflict ceases to be a spiritual struggle and becomes corporate downsizing.

When survival eclipses discipleship, paradox degenerates into hypocrisy. The church risks becoming an organization obsessed with stability rather than a community oriented toward the cross.

Center and Margin Reimagined

Diaspora theologian Jong Soo Park offers a profound reframing: the true center is not defined by the mainstream but by the presence of God. If God dwells at the margins, the margins become the center. If God is absent from the mainstream, the mainstream cannot claim centrality. This vision liberates immigrant churches from anxiety about institutional status. Korean presbyteries in Canada are not merely surviving within a progressive denomination; they are testifying to a theological claim: “That faithfulness can endure inside tension, that dissent need not destroy unity, and that identity can remain intact without retreat.”

A Glimpse of Korea's Future

The paradox unfolding in Canada may foreshadow Korea's own ecclesial future. As immigration increases and demographic decline reshapes Korean society, new questions will arise: Will Korean denominations allow multilingual

presbyteries? Will immigrant pastors rise to denominational leadership? Can bilingual second-generation ministers serve without suspicion? Just as North American missionaries once evangelized Korea and Korean diaspora churches now influence Western denominations, so too immigrant pastors may one day shape Korean ecclesial structures. Paradoxical coexistence is not a Canadian anomaly; it may become a Korean necessity.

The Final Word

Korean immigrant churches in Canada embody something rare. They are conservative and progressive, marginal and central, pilgrim and settler. They resist radical secular theology while rejecting fundamentalist withdrawal. They ordain women yet oppose LGBTQ ordination. They remain within progressive institutions yet maintain theological dissent. This is not confusion; it is disciplined complexity.

In a polarized age, where institutions fracture under pressure and communities retreat into ideological silos, immigrant churches may offer an unexpected model: hold identity firmly, engage the mainstream courageously, refuse simplistic binaries and accept tension as part of discipleship.

Paradoxical coexistence is not weakness — it is faithfulness lived in history. And perhaps, in a fractured world, it is one way the kingdom of God advances quietly but persistently through imperfect communities learning to belong without losing themselves.

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Be rooted in the Lord and His Word

Five tools to tackle negativity

By Rev. Matthew Ruttan

“Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season...” (Psalm 1:1-3)

Negativity. It’s an unpleasant part of life. But what do we mean by “negativity”?

We tend to use the word to describe not only things we don’t like, but a perspective, posture or attitude that seems deliberately counter-productive. We also tend to use the word when dealing with people who we feel are somehow “against” us no matter what we do.

For example, perhaps you are dealing with a person who always shoots down your ideas, no matter what they are. Or perhaps you are in a congregational culture where the ongoing narrative is doom-and-gloom, as if Jesus is still in the tomb. Maybe you are navigating a time in history that has a new, divisive controversy every six months. Based on the definition above, all of this could be considered “dealing with negativity.”

Before I share a few thoughts about how to deal with this, we need to remind ourselves that Jesus himself was no stranger to dealing with negativity. He encountered personal, ongoing criticism from the Pharisees (Mark 2:24). He had to deal with disciples who questioned his actions (Matthew 16:22) and fickle crowds (John 6:66; Mark 15:13). He came under pressure from the Sanhedrin (Mark

14:55), Herod (Luke 23:9) and Pilate (John 19:1).

If the Master had to deal with it, so too the servants. If the King had to deal with it, so too the subjects. If the Teacher had to deal with it, so too the students.

So, how do we deal with it? Let me share five points.

First, serve God first, always.

Many people have a strong desire to be “people-pleasers.” Some more than others. To resist this urge, we need to strive to serve *God* first, not people.

In John 12:43 Jesus criticized the Pharisees by saying: “they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” Paul expressed a similar thought in Galatians 1:10: “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” In short, he was saying that it was more important for him to be a God-pleaser than a people-pleaser.

Having said this, I know of people who defend themselves by saying they are putting God first, but seem to enjoy being rude or condescending in the process. But striving to serve God first is not an excuse to bypass virtue.

Second, know the (real) enemy.

Earlier, I mentioned the personal and ongoing opposition which Jesus faced. I intentionally left a very important category

out of that list. Here it is. Jesus was also in a non-stop battle with the demonic.

I recently did an informal survey of the Gospel of Mark to see how often Jesus came into conflict with demons or Satan. Depending on how you classify some of the stories, between twenty-four and forty percent of the Gospel includes specifically named or implied conflict with dark, demonic powers. That's a lot!

In addition to his temptation in the wilderness and the casting out of evil spirits, the evil one influenced Judas to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3), and worked behind the scenes to influence the political powers that ordered his crucifixion (1 Corinthians 2:8).

This is a critical insight about the landscape around us, even today. It's also why Paul provides this reminder in Ephesians 6:12: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Because of this, we know that the negative people around us are not our principal enemy. Michael Miller from Remnant University said: "There really is a common enemy, and it's not one another." The common enemy isn't the complainer, the attacker, or the instigator. It's the Devil. Therefore, we put on God's armour (Ephesians 6:13-18), and pray against the influence of the evil one, not only on other people, but on ourselves.

Third, draw clos(er) to God, and to others.

In his book *Lead with Prayer*, Ryan Skoog highlights some discouraging research. He found that well-educated and well-trained leaders are less likely to pray: "As we gain our footing as leaders, we risk

losing our dependence on God." Obviously, that's a problem, and hopefully it's a warning that finds a welcome reception in our ears. Our positions of influence and authority should make us *more* hungry for intimacy with God, not *less*.

If we are to deal with negativity in a healthy way, we need to have a healthy, well-rooted relationship with the Lord. This includes prayer and Bible-reading. And I'm not talking about three minutes in the morning as you pull up to your desk. It will involve a series of practices that will tether us to the Lord as we walk through our days and dealings, including the tough ones.

Intentional, sustained time with God is the life-blood of leaders who are able to navigate repeated negativity. As a part of this, I would include appropriate supports. Fellowship with other Christians, as well as times of confession and celebration, are also spiritual disciplines which help draw you closer to God.

There have also been times when I have sought out a trained Christian therapist to help me sort through my dark feelings. I see that too as a gift from God within the body of Christ. From what I've seen, congregational leaders tend to keep too many of their challenges to themselves. This is also true with respect to how they do (or don't) deal with their elder boards or ministry teams. When we share our concerns in appropriate ways, there are often helps or encouragements we hadn't anticipated. Further, if you are dealing with a toxic or potentially abusive situation, your elders or ministry team may be able to provide guidance, protection or much-needed friendship.

I recently read about a 175-foot-tall Sitka spruce tree. The roots were spread out over an acre of land, interlacing with the

roots from other trees. A local arborist spoke of an underground support system where the roots actually grafted together with the roots of other trees. When one tree was cut down, the other trees were weakened as well. It sounds like trees and people have more in common than we realize.

Fourth, shut the digital door.

My dad was ahead of his time. In the 1980s his employer offered him a free laptop. He refused. He was asked why he didn't want it. "Because then you'll expect me to work from home for free." Genius! Today, this pressure has multiplied one-hundred-fold. In addition to laptops there are emails, texts, and social media feeds and messages.

The reason I raise this topic in the context of this article is because "negativity" now has many more ways of oozing into your life and threatening your well-being and peace of mind.

Thirty years ago, when people came home from work—and from stressful situations—they had a very good chance of making a mental transition from work-to-home. Today, that transition is much more difficult to make. And do you know what? We're our own worst enemies. That's why we need to shut the digital door.

How do we do that? Don't check messages in the morning or in the evening. Or mindlessly scroll after dark. Many people struggle with this because they have not been careful. They have given out their phone/text numbers to anyone and everyone. By sending late night emails they have sent the silent message that "I'm open for business 24 hours a day."

Some people reading this might think it's too late to shift gears in this area of their life. But it's never too late. Perhaps you'll need to get a new phone number or create a new (personal) email address. Perhaps you'll need to do some teaching in your congregation or with your elders or ministry team explaining why this is important not only for you, but for the well-being of the ministry as a whole.

Personally, shutting the digital door has been one of the best things I have ever done when it comes to my mental and emotional health, especially during periods of stress or conflict. Only a select number of people have my text number, and I ask them to only use it if their concern is very time sensitive or a pastoral emergency. Otherwise, send me an email (which I'll check in the daytime) or pick up the phone.

You need your off time to be actual off time. Physical rest without mental rest isn't really rest. When you are "dealing with negativity" you need a place outside of "working hours" where you can experience peace and refreshment with the Lord and others. That's why we need to shut the digital door. No, scratch that. Slam it closed. A future version of yourself will drop to their knees and thank you.

Fifth, train yourself by dealing proactively with bite-sized negativity.

Since negativity isn't nice, we tend to avoid it. When someone shares an overly-specific or unnecessary criticism, perhaps we just pretend it didn't happen or say a prayer and ask God to change that person's heart. (By the way, praying in this way is always a good idea!)

But what if we used some of those situations as training? What if we used them to gain valuable experience for dealing with negativity in a healthy way?

This would also build up our mental and emotional tolerance to being in uncomfortable conversations.

I had a situation like this recently. In a group setting, someone said something that was critical of other people in the group, including myself. It was awkward. I don't think the individual had bad intentions. Nevertheless, the person was misguided in their words. I decided to use the situation to speak up. I explained that I appreciated where they were coming from, but that I disagreed with their comments. I tried to do so in a way that was respectful. Afterward, I approached the person one-on-one to talk privately and to ensure they understood where I was coming from. I also wanted to ensure they knew I wasn't attacking them personally, but just disagreed with their comments.

This is an example of a small “bite-sized” situation of negativity. When we walk intentionally into these sorts of moments, they help to prepare us for “bigger” situations when they arise—which, of course, they will.

A tree planted by streams of water

This article began with a quote from Psalm 1. It's one of my favourites. Sometimes called “the gateway to the psalms,” Psalm 1 contrasts the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked. It uses the imagery of a tree that is planted by streams of water. The person who is blessed is the one “whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.”

It follows that we need to be rooted in the Lord and his Word. This rootedness includes an interconnectedness with others, as our local arborist reminded us. Further, without deep roots we will find it

very difficult to stand firm when the winds of negativity begin to blow.

Speaking of trees, a group of scientists created a biosphere. They thought they had made a perfect environment for plants and trees. The trees grew quickly, but toppled at a rapid pace. Why? Since the environment was highly controlled it didn't have any wind. As a result, the root structure of the trees was weak. Only with wind and resistance would the roots press deeper and provide longer-lasting stability not only for themselves, but for the other trees around them.^[iv] With this in mind, perhaps we can think of adversity like wind—something which may not be pleasant, but can make us and the people around us healthier and stronger.

In closing, let me just say that I realize this article is partial. There are a lot of suggestions I could have made for dealing with negativity, but if I had shared them all we'd be here all day. However, my prayer is that this has given you some tangible help and hope for moving forward. No one likes negativity. I certainly don't. But it's a part of life and leadership. Jesus had to deal with it, and so did Paul. And if the Master had to deal with it, so too the servants.

In summary: First, serve God first, always. Second, know the (real) enemy. Third, draw clos(er) to God, and to others. Fourth, shut the digital door. Fifth, train yourself by dealing proactively with bite-sized negativity. “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10).

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Bavinck in brief: a green theology

As with nature, Scripture and the church are organisms

By Rev. Dr. Robert K. MacKenzie

Theologian and professor Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) is highly regarded for a multitude of reasons. Two of them stand out. First, his appreciation for philosophy resulted in him sparking a renewal of many aspects of Reformed theology in the light of the intellectual changes in our modern age. Second, he built upon the Bible-based ideas of one of the founding leaders of Protestant movement, John Calvin, advancing and deepening the Reformer's contributions.

Educated at conservative and liberal schools in Holland, Bavinck was well-positioned to take on the huge task of keeping Reformed theology relevant and active in the modern context. Bavinck's interaction with philosophy and with Calvin is exemplified by his use of the "organic" theme as applied to Scripture and the church, among other subjects.

Christian theologians up until the time of the Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries had usually spoken of God primarily as a philosophical concept. Heavily influenced by ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato, the personal dimension of God and an appreciation for his continuing care of his creation and its people was not foremost in their thinking.

Pioneer Protestant leaders, on the other hand, began with the God of the Bible, a God who was and is active in nurturing his chosen people and in guiding world events according to his own plan, in spite of sin's considerable corrupting force. In addition, they stressed the personal

relations among and distinctive work of the three persons of the Trinity.

Bavinck continued this tradition, organizing his four-volume study of Reformed dogmatics (teaching about doctrine for the benefit of the Church) in a Trinitarian pattern. Yet he blended this biblically orthodox approach with compatible elements of the philosophy from our Modern period as well as that of the ancient Greeks and Christian writers.

No longer was God seen as static and impersonal to the great extent that he was. He was personal in his internal relations as a trinity and yet a unity, and his "being" was not prioritized over his "becoming," in the sense that he was seen as active in carrying out his will and plan every moment of our day.

Bavinck was always careful to avoid seeing God as Nature (pantheism) or as distant from the world (deism). God was always active, caring for Creation and all people but particularly his elect. God himself did not change, but he was ever active in our changing world.

Bavinck's and Calvin's stress on the personal aspect of God's nature is very much in keeping with Jesus' teaching about God, who was described as intensely in intensely personal terms. He was a Father to Jesus (as the Son) and also to those who believed in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Also, Jesus' parables made it very clear that God was active in the affairs of the world and was growing and governing his Kingdom (his kingly reign) in the world, a world that would one day be renewed without sin in glory.

For Bavinck, the organic theme was patterned on the nature of the trinitarian God, which encompassed both a unity and a diversity, albeit by way of analogy and not of essence. This motif includes a number of characteristics. It refers to something that is alive, is composed of many parts or members yet is a single entity, and that has an origin, grows with purpose and moves toward an end or goal. He cites the basic understanding of an organism in nature as an example, and views Scripture and the church as organisms. Both are made up of many elements, yet are independent unities (independent except under God, of course).

Scripture: In terms of Scripture, he argues, the Bible is the Word of God, his revelation to humans. But it was not delivered “mechanically” through direct dictation by God, nor in many cases stemmed from the prophetic inspiration of its writers. The Bible is inspired, but its writers were not all inspired by the same kind of inspiration as that of the prophets.

The Bible was written by fully human authors, whom God prepared for the task before birth and who were guided by the Holy Spirit. The writers were free and not coerced to write what they did. The apostles were often moved to testify to Jesus, for example, but did so freely and without coercion. In very general terms, by analogy the written Word was “incarnated” in the Bible so that it was both fully human and fully divine.

Scripture was an organism that was created and guided by God according to his eternal plan, making use of writers who were prepared by God to do the job and did it willingly. The Word of God was written to reveal God’s will to humanity, then and now. It is not dead letters on a page but is a living organism that continues to bring God’s revelation to

people today. It is a continuing instrument of God’s grace used by the Holy Spirit to convict and to convert people as God wills.

With regard to the study of the Bible, Bavinck sees value in studying the background and ideas of each writer, respecting them as individuals. Their varying perspectives on God’s nature and work and their various testimonies work together in an organic fashion (diversity) to provide life to the Scriptures as a whole (unity). Bible scholarship was endorsed, if its end result was to understand God’s revelation better.

He writes: “In the past, when a deeper understanding was lacking, this difference was explained in terms of the will of the Holy Spirit. Given the organic view, however, this difference is perfectly natural. Similarly, the use of sources, the authors’ familiarity with earlier writings, their own inquiries, memory, reflection and life experience are all included, and not excluded, by the organic view. The Holy Spirit himself prepared his writers in that fashion” (*Reformed Dogmatics* 1, pg. 443)

Church: Viewing the church as an organism is nothing special for many Protestants. It is, as Paul writes, a body that is made up of many parts or members. They all contribute and work together to fulfill God’s plan to use the church as an instrument of salvation and Christian growth, as well as a model for society as a whole.

It is not primarily an institution, nor is it simply a collection of individuals. Its “living stones” have a purpose as an organism that moves towards the end in the world to come. Its origin is God, it is guided by him, and it will be present with him in the world to come.

Bavinck stresses that variety and diversity in the church is not accidental but is intentional on the part of God. As such, church members must respect and love their fellow believers and be willing to work with them in unity and in humility for the sake of the church's mission. Variety in unity was a positive, not a negative, and meant to be welcomed and enjoyed.

In keeping with his definition of organic, he writes: "Thus the church exists in the midst of the world with an origin, essence, activity and purpose of its own. While in every respect it is distinct from that world, it never stands apart from or alongside the world." (*RD* 4, p. 435).

And: "Along this organic path Christian truth and the Christian life are introduced in all the circles of natural life, so that life in the household and the extended family is restored to honor, the wife (woman) is again viewed as the equal of the husband (man), the sciences and arts are Christianized, the level of the moral life is elevated, society and state are reformed, laws and institutions, morals and customs are made Christian" (*RD* 4, p. 437).

Conclusion: The organic theme opens up discussion of God, his plan and his work in a way that is familiar to us modern folk. It stresses the personal element in God's work, all the while relating it to organisms that God forms and guides to accomplish his will.

The motif avoids modern views that God is to be equated with the natural world or is said not to be involved with its everyday operation. God is instead the living God, the heavenly father who saves and nurtures his own, who dispenses common grace to those who are outside of his family of the elect, and who grows the Kingdom for his own glory now and in the world to come.

There is much more to discover of Bavinck's use of the organic theme. The masterly work of James Eglinton, who also wrote the theologian's biography, an excellent article by J. Todd Billings on Calvin's and Bavinck's views on union with Christ, and three short summaries on the internet by Matt Marino are worth pursuing. (James Eglinton's doctoral work on Bavinck's use of the organic theme is outstanding. It is available in book and e-form as *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (T&T Clark, 2012), albeit at a very high cover price! J. Todd Billings' article on Bavinck and Calvin is found in his book *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Baker, 2011), which has other outstanding articles in it. (We can be thankful that the terrible illness that struck him a number of years back did not take him quickly.) Matt Marino has published on the Internet three perceptive essays on Bavinck and organic themes, taking account of Eglinton's work. The link to the first of these is www.reformedclassicalist.com/home/the-organic-perfecting-world-of-bavinck/).

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