



# THINK DIFFERENT

Urban Religious Communities:  
Problem Solvers or Trouble Makers?

Edited by  
Geoff Ryan and Robert Joustra

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CARDUS

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**Cardus**

185 Young Street  
Hamilton, ON L8P1V9  
(905)528-8866  
Fax (905)528-9433

**Email:** info@cardus.ca

**Website:** www.cardus.ca

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# INTRODUCTION

Michael Van Pelt

It was late on a Friday afternoon in July when our bullet train pulled into the central station in Cologne, Germany. A pungent summer scent hung in the air, accented by a fresh breeze coming in off the Rhine. The dome of the train station hid none of the splendour of our arrival. Soaring above the Canadian pilgrims stood the grand Cathedral of Cologne, its spires dominating and sculpting the horizon, molding even the sunset to its awesome Gothic dimensions. We were strangers in this German landscape, and had come for exactly this sight—what the city might bill as its premier tourist attraction. But a question pressed on each of us, traveling companions, as we considered this. A tourist attraction? Is that truly what this

cathedral is? A building of refined splendour used for digital snaps and post cards?

Some months later Bus 17 from Kyoto's Kawaramachi Station pulled into its most popular stop: Kinkakuji, or the Golden Temple. Again we took digital photo shots of a Wishing Buddha and cast aside spare yen in hopes of making all our material dreams come true. Is this what the great Buddhist and Shinto temples and shrines of Japan were? I collected the requisite post cards, and shuffled off to find further monuments of tourist grandeur.

Reflecting on the institutions of faith within the world's major urban centers, even a charitable person might believe them relics destined for nothing more than exploitation in architectural consumerism. The intentional faith import of churches and temples in Germany and Japan seems dead. Some would argue the influence of faith in Canada or the United States is on life support. In the global North the precipitous decline of faith institutions in urban centres goes mostly uncontested. Urban visionaries have taken their cues from this sociological intuition. Religious institutions in a city landscape are notable in Canada for tax free property status and perhaps architectural tourism, as we might say of Nôtre-Dame Basilica or St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal. Religious communities are a blip on the tax grid, a hiccup in zoning, or a commercialized relic.

Reginald Bibby, a sociologist of religion in Canada at the University of Lethbridge, long predicted the death of religion's relevance to our city landscape. Religion was on its way out as a practical city-shaper. But in *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (2004), Bibby suggested that questions of meaning and purpose among younger Canadians were revitalizing urban religious communities. The American sociologist Peter Berger agrees:

I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake. It wasn't a crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it was basically wrong. Most of the world today is certainly not secular.

Despite this new reality, the idea of religion and its institutions as a *public good* is a tough one for most urban thinkers. Where religion is acknowledged it is often in the form of an obligatory genuflection to multiculturalism; a "sigh" and an "if you have to, I guess." In my experience religion is treated like an unstable social element, the nitroglycerin of social innovation: perfectly stable if left to itself, but be *awfully* careful how you handle it, if you must.

Bibby claims that the "gods are restless" and it is organized forms of religion that stand to gain the most. Canada has significant Jewish, Muslim and Hindu communities who will join in this renaissance. If these sociological intuitions are cor-

rect, these urban communities—right there in front of us—stand poised to make a significant impact in our common city life. This book has therefore never been more urgent.

Our authors in this book have been asked to answer, in shorter, digestible essays, a single question: *urban religious communities—problem solvers or trouble makers?* Here you'll find a healthy mix of the optimistic and the cynical; the political and the religious; the pragmatic and the visionary: a mix, in short, that reflects the real conversation as it is happening in Canada and beyond. It is a conversation happening in church rooms and city halls, mosque atriums and committee rooms.

Thank you for joining this conversation and for joining Cardus and its partners in helping to rethink and rebuild Canada's social architecture.



Michael Van Pelt is President of Cardus. He has over 20 years of experience in public life, including advocacy with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, the Chamber of Commerce and serving as a municipal Councillor. He continues to consult widely, helping institutions connect their beliefs with their behaviours.

He lives in Ancaster, Ontario with his wife Deani and his three children.

## RETHINKING SACRED SPACE IN THE AGE OF THE MEGACHURCH

Chris Cuthill

There is an old legend told about the conversion of Russia to Orthodoxy in 988. Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv wanted to unite his people in a common religion, but was not sure which to choose. So he sent messengers out to the lands of Catholicism, Islam, Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. It was the impressions the messengers had of their visit to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople that won him over to Orthodox Christianity. Speaking of the worship they saw in the Great Church they said, "We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth. It would

be impossible to find on earth any splendor greater than this... Never shall we be able to forget so great a beauty." I have always been fascinated by this story. I think there is something remarkable about the fact that the very foundation and establishment of the Russian Church's "conversion story" is based on their discovery of God through architecture.

The magnificence of Hagia Sofia is, of course, legendary. Built on an unprecedented scale with a dome that seems to float on its pendentives like rims of light, its glory is said to have prompted the Emperor Justinian to declare, "Solomon, I have surpassed thee." Most certainly the wow factor of the building informed the opinion of Volodymyr's messengers, but I have always wondered if there was something more than the expression of sublime awe that prompted such avowal. While an impressive architectural feat, surely Volodymyr's messengers would have reported that a larger dome capped Rome's Pantheon. Or was there something more that spurred such praise of its splendour?

Walking into Hagia Sofia, the vast unobstructed interior of the church leads the eye in two directions. While traditional basilicas draw the eye toward the altar and the eastern apse, Hagia Sofia also draws the eye upward, to the dome, the vault of heaven that appears suspended on a luminous bed of radiance. It is the tension between transcendence and the sacraments that makes this space so special. Surely, thought Justinian when he

compared his church to the Temple, God is present here; this is a sacred space.

For many Christians, especially conservative Protestants, this is where a red flag goes up. I was raised in an evangelical church where we called the main worship space an auditorium because "sanctuary" seemed too close to suggesting that this space was any more special or sacred than another space. In this environment I learned to de-mysticize my faith. Since God was omnipresent, everywhere, in theory, must be holy. In practice this equated to God living in the human heart, not in physical buildings. Later, while attending a Calvinist church, I learned that we should never make distinctions between the religious and the secular, that all of life is religion. But over the years my own experience has led me to challenge this. The calm still of walking through an empty cathedral, the smell of incense, the taste of the elements—these things have given me an experience of the *mysterium tremendum* that seems connected to special places, or perhaps, places made special.

C.S. Lewis once spoke fondly of special places—imaginary woods where faeries dance and satyrs frolic. These are fictional worlds, but they can inform our perception of the real world nonetheless. The schoolboy, he argues, who reads about enchanted woods does not despise real woods because he has read of these special places. The reading, he argued, "makes all real woods a little enchanted."



I wonder if we have lost something in our Protestant tradition by doing away with the idea of special places, places where art and architecture join together to simulate God's presence in a way that makes the simulation not only desire the real thing more fully, but helps us to see the holy in the "real woods" of our cities. I like the term "sacred space" for the same reason that Lewis likes the term "enchanted." The "magic" of the space is not about God living there—it is about us setting space apart. While temples house gods, the Christian notion of church is communal, flesh and blood. The church as a building is a symbolic extension of this community, and as a physical space where Christians come together, it shapes, by means of design and placement, how we understand what it means to be a community.

The term "sacredness" can be assigned to places for a variety of reasons. Perhaps it is a place where something important occurred, an event that defines the identity of a people. Mecca and Jerusalem are considered "holy" cities because of their centrality to faith identities, but perhaps this distinction could be also stretched to cities like Boston and Plymouth in telling the sacred story of American civic religion. The term "sacredness" is also used to set apart places of great carnage and destruction: Lisbon, Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Auschwitz—places which evoke a reverent ineffability otherwise connected to the divine. It's also used to describe buildings that house important objects or remains, the relics of saints. But is there something innately

sacred about certain architectural constructs, or to put it another way, are there architectural features or qualities evoke a sense of holiness?

For me, the divide between sacred and secular is not a matter of style. That is, I would not say that the cathedral is "sacred" architecture and the big-box store is "secular". When we begin to carve up creation in ways that elevate styles and conventions as "sacred" over "worldly," we begin to reassign those square inches of creation in ways that undermine the potential for all styles to fall under Peter's blanket of *kosher*—being set apart. I believe that cultural variety is the treasure promised by Christ's redemption, and that hierarchies we develop along stylistic lines are not only culturally imposed, but are a sinful distortions of the treasure box. There is no godly "style" for worship or architecture, just as there is no godly style for painting or how we fashion our hair or the type of ice cream we prefer. God delights in the multi-flavoured richness of variety.

Although certain architectural styles *do* reflect particular sects or flavors of Christianity (for example, the squared dome of Orthodox churches) I prefer to speak of the decorum or fittingness of architectural metaphors. While all of life is indeed religious, there is something peculiar about places of worship that distinguishes them from everyday or ordinary life. The place of worship is not simply a utilitarian space where people gather, it is place where we come together through the symbol of a body—an image further reinforced through the Eucharist.

Even the simplest images of a church *family* and a *house* of worship create metaphorical links between church communities and the intimacy of domestic relationships. While early Christians did worship together in private homes, the idea of the church as a house is a rich metaphor that reflects and shapes an image of Christian identity. Even the Puritan notion of a “meeting house” has a significance beyond geographical space—the idea of a “meeting house” is a symbolic concentration of authenticity, simplicity and hospitality. There is something about meeting together with other Christians to worship that extends beyond the pragmatic convenience of mass-delivering a message or sermon to a group. The very act of coming together, of coming to the table, suggests that the Eucharist is a symbolic destination. By setting these places apart as destinations where we meet or come, we impart meaning on them—we make them sacramental.

I would like to suggest that even when conscious efforts are made to neutralize the set-apart quality of a church building or worship space, the very nature of communal worship as an abstraction or symbolic concentration of our service to God, in which we are perpetually worshipping through word and deed, means that there can never be neutral or “secular” worship spaces. Despite the best efforts of the Puritans to create a neutral worship space in which congregants would not be distracted from hearing the word of scripture, the act of moving the Eucharist off to the side and making the pulpit the center of wor-

ship was a powerful architectural metaphor. Historically, the placement of altars, pulpits and baptismal fonts have been some of the strongest indicators of fundamental doctrinal positions of a denomination. As a symbolic representation of Christian community, worship spaces do more than contain or shelter people: they reveal the character, theology and values of a community. This is why worship space is important.

Modern church architecture seems to fall into two distinct camps—those who avoid change at all costs and those embrace it fully, confusing novelty with relevance. The polemics of the so-called “worship wars” are often split between those who are unwilling to accept change and those who celebrate it. The fact that we change and our world changes is inevitable—it is *how* we deal with change that will define us. The message of Christ remains eternal—but it is not a conceptual idea above the fray. Christ, after all, established the church; he didn’t write a book. The gospel is embodied in our hands, in our buildings, in our cities. We live in a world that is much, much smaller than it ever was before. Technology allows us to connect in ways that condense our shared global space. Can we begin to think of church as a place where we learn how to change together; a place where we embrace the paradox of becoming more rooted in space while forging authentic relationship and sacred spaces through technology? Can we create shared space for the Desert Fathers and U2?

Thinking mindfully about space is how we begin to construct sacred spaces that shape us as much as we shape them.



Chris Cuthill serves as Art Chair at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, where he teaches courses in Art Theory, Art History and Popular Culture. Chris finished a Masters degree in Philosophical Aesthetics in 1999 at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto.

His thesis, entitled *Mutilated Music: Towards an After Auschwitz Aesthetic*, explored the philosophical and ethical limitations of artistic representations of the Holocaust. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam with research focused on the topic of suffering and art.

Chris lives in downtown Hamilton, Ontario with his wife Dawn, two children and a chubby beagle.

## TOWARD A SPIRITUAL URBANISM

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco

Religious communities in Canada are as active as ever and more numerous. It is no secret that they keep a quiet agenda in the light of media-generated prejudice. The church-state division has become a canyon. And religious belief is widely seen as different from spiritual belief. The “church” as a problem maker is the standard of secular thought.

Yet it is through religious activity and liturgy that people focus on common ideals and beliefs. It is precisely that glue which is missing in the fabric of diversity and urban difference.

The question becomes how to restore coherent ideals to the urban experiment. It is doubtful that respect for religious communities can be restored to historical precedents. And ecumenism cannot be a strategy, or it would have succeeded by now. It would take an army of God-minded journalists to insert robustness into the public personae of religious practitioners. The trend is against religion. And the intelligent thing to do is to work out the terms of the spirituality acceptable to all—terms that neither dilute religious tradition, nor offend the neophyte searchings of the secular Pilgrim.

We need no new apologists for churches and we need no witch hunters in the search of religious fanaticism. We need a discussion of spiritual communities, not religious communities. And a mediation between the religious and non-religious continues to polarize the discussion.

There are millions of people in the urban environment waiting for the terms that will include their private spiritual searchings and rally them to communality. Until people find the common denominators of their spirituality in a public celebration the question of urban progress in terms of quality of life remains defunct. Spirituality is not a private business. The human spirit yearns to recognize itself in a public forum. This is the basis of urban citizenship, without which any body politic will fail.

Consequently the question of the church being a problem solver or problem maker is bogus. The question of how to define

a spiritual activity, formalized for the urban environment is more relevant. If the word “spiritual” seems like a problematic catch-all, let us consider that the variety and norms of the numerous religious institutions are irreconcilably complicated and political.

The urban discussion must come to understand the huge resource of social capital available if and only if civic leaders understand that spirituality is a pressing, persuasive and urgent concern of urban citizens. The repression of the spiritual instinct in the citizen leads to huge economic pitfalls in terms of mental and physical health and productivity.

As for extant religious communities *per se* in their wondering of how to integrate themselves understandably into the urban fabric, it is good to come to an understanding that the need for God comes and expresses itself in terms that challenge the lexicon of convention. If they want to solve anything in the urban setting it would help to point the urban enterprise towards its natural coordinator—the spiritual. It is not an age of dogmatics, but a time for sewing the theology of belief in an ambience hungry for such assurance.



Fr. Pier Giorgio Di Cicco is the author of twenty volumes of poetry and a book of manifestos on creative cities. He was Goggio Visiting Professor at the University of Toronto in 2004 and in that year was appointed Poet Laureate of the City of Toronto. Since then he has become a major speaker and thinker on creative economies and has informed municipal policy on federal and provincial levels. He is an urban consultant and Curator of the Toronto Museum Project and a recipient of a 2007 Canadian Urban Institute Urban Leadership Award. He is on the design team of BMI/Pace Architects/Planners, Principal of Municipal Mind, and an ordained Roman Catholic Priest.

## A CHURCH AT, FOR OR OF THE POOR? HOW TO BE CHURCH FOR THE MARGINALIZED

Cheri DiNovo

As the Pastor in an inner city church and now Provincial Representative for the same neighbourhood, I've learned from those who suffer from mental health, addiction issues or both. Certainly they've taught me over the years how to "be" evangelized. Starting out as ordained clergy I thought that evangelization flowed from God through me to those in need. In fact,

those in need proved to be the evangelizers and I the sometimes difficult convert. My book *Qu(e)rying Evangelism*, published by Pilgrim Press, won the Lambda Award in Washington, D.C., detailing that very process. Here is a snapshot of what I learned.

Most churches surrounded by economically disenfranchised folk see themselves as what I'd describe as churches *at* the poor. That is to say, they see as part of their mission, everything from feeding the hungry here or abroad, housing the homeless, caring for the indigent. The 'poor' are not part of their congregation *per se*, but physically removed from it. No matter how often they are in prayer or at a food bank sponsored by the congregation or in an 'Out of the Cold' program, most who attend on a Sunday morning could not identify one of those helped. Even if they can, as in Christian Children's Fund, they've probably never met the person their generosity assists. This is the well known and well practiced charity model.

The church *at* the poor preaches the brother- and sisterhood of all and practices it in community building among its members, most of whom have jobs, or find themselves at the very least with some degree of financial security. Let me stress, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this. Particularly for those Churches located in more affluent areas, this may well be the only way of practicing mission. The gospel of Christ is almost never these days the prerequisite for aid. The gospel of Christ is *a priori* the rationale behind the charity. Members through their

tithing 'perform' their Christianity by sharing the wealth that has blessed them directly; absolutely laudable and absolutely Christian.

Refugees in Africa, AIDS orphans, inner city welfare recipients, those with addiction and mental health issues and many others would suffer far more than they do now were it not for Churches *at* the poor. I was preaching not long ago at an extremely well-heeled congregation in one of the richest areas of the city, and I praised them for their generous support for a host of programs. I spoke genuinely. Most had never met one of the recipients of their charity and never would. Most had never met a 'poor' person but many of them did all that they could to give back.

Certainly we've all known churches that can afford to do mission but only see their mandate as saving souls; bodies be damned. As Jesus himself reminded us, if we're not feeding the hungry, providing water to the thirsty and assisting the prisoner, we're not the church. End of discussion. Churches *at* the poor perform a valuable function in God's world.

Then there are whole strata of churches that see as their primary function mission work. These churches provide housing directly, set up food banks, provide addiction counseling, take communion to rooming houses, deliver Christmas gifts to low income children or run continuous overseas aid programs; the

congregants actually “meet and know” the beneficiaries of their assistance. These I would call churches *for* the poor.

One such church in my community elected some years back to tear down their cathedral edifice to maintain a small sanctuary and build a tower of housing for the marginalized in the streets around them. They became a ‘housing’ provider as their way of being church in the inner city. Another church has fifteen social workers on staff supported by the entire denomination that provide daily assistance to those who need it around them. On any given day one could witness a line up to receive everything from food to clean needles.

At some point, such congregations elect to become churches *for* the poor in a very direct and compelling way. Usually there is a small but dedicated worshipping congregation that works faithfully to keep the presence in the community alive. If one were to worship in such a congregation one would no doubt also witness the poor at worship, either on a Sunday morning (more rarely) or most often, as part of the social service provided. There may be routine visits of clergy to the housing units or a breakfast program with worship components, administered by congregants.

Quite simply, our marginalized communities would be immeasurably worse off were it not for these beacons of hope that exist in every city across North America and in most cities in the world. Often Christianity itself has been spread by the teachers

and healers in Gospel inspired communities who have direct contact with those they assist. I came to Christ as a result of just such intervention in the world.

I remember as a street kid going to an inner city mission for food and hearing the Bible at the same time. The sanctuary of that mission was, as is often the case, separate, and had its own dedicated congregation who were seemingly the last of the middle class in the area. With my hipster youth and dress I would never have walked into a service, but I certainly benefited from their work on my behalf.

The last church, the rarest breed of church, is the church of the poor. We learned to be one at the congregation I served in Toronto’s west end, but these are far more rare. This church is not *for* or *at* the poor, although it incorporates the strengths of those congregations as well. It asks itself, “In what kind of church would the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the hated, the poor *want* to worship and serve?”

Here’s what we learned from those we were called to serve, not only as objects of mission or objects of service but as “subjects” in worship as well. We learned the following mostly by making every conceivable mistake on the road to radical inclusivity.

Those who are stoned, in withdrawal, hearing voices, dressed badly, dressed weirdly, poor, marginalized and disenfranchised do not feel comfortable worshipping with ‘straight’

people anymore than straight, middle class, sober people feel comfortable worshipping with them. The poor need their own service and possibly their own church where they can experience ownership not only of the mission but of the building and its resources.

They require a bulletin-less or almost bulletin-less service. Most poor folk don't have eyes that work and can't afford glasses that work. Some may be illiterate. A service with all the same elements but where hymns can be learned or taught orally and sung frequently gives someone who can't read a sense of competency.

The worship must have a healing component. Marginalized folk (like everyone) need and desire healing liturgy. 'Coffee Hour' after service needs to be replaced with a communal meal either after or before. It's difficult to focus on worship if you're hungry. This is what the early churches provided. We need to make it available as well.

The 'offering' is extremely important. It affords dignity. One crack addict who was a member of our church busked to feed his addiction but on Sundays he donated his 'busk money' to the church. This was usually 30-50 dollars, representing about a sixth of his monthly income—that's better than the Biblical tithe and far more generous than most Canadians.

Temptation should also be avoided—that is to say, the church should be not leave money or silver-plated chalices around or office doors unlocked. However, the sanctuary must be a sanctuary for everyone always, which means access for prayer when worship isn't underway, a safe space for everyone and pastoral care for everyone.

This may sound like a tall order but I assure you, if you consider becoming a church *of* the poor it will bless your ministry in ways you can barely dream of. The institution of an evening service for an entirely new congregation of souls hungry for the gospel as much as they are hungry for food is always worth the effort. In our experience our congregation of the poor dominated all the committees and were the most able and dependable of volunteers. They didn't have busy lives. They needed busy lives.

One of the unexpected blessings was the growth of our Sunday School and morning service as young families heard about us as the "church of the poor," and decided to make us their church home as well. Our greatest blessing was the confidence that we were remaining true to the call of Jesus Christ in the midst of a large and often suffering city.





Prior to her election to Queen's Park, Rev. Dr. Cheri DiNovo was the Minister of Emmanuel-Howard Park United Church in Toronto and performed the first legalized same-sex marriage in North America, and her book *Qu(e)rying Evangelism: Growing a Church From the Outside/In* won the Lambda award for spirituality and religion in 2006.

Cheri has been an outspoken leader for many important issues, including poverty in Ontario with the Living Wage Bill and Payday Lending Bill. She is also an avid supporter of housing as a human right, and recently introduced a bill into Legislature regarding Inclusionary Zoning (to allow developers to offer 5-10% of units in new buildings as affordable housing). Cheri was one of the sponsors of the Holodomor Memorial Day Act.

## UNPACKING THE URBAN PARADOX: BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

Timothy Epp

*"People are yearning to discover community. We have had enough of loneliness, independence and competition." (Jean Vanier)*

It's a warm summer night, one of May's final hurrahs. My family and I pull up in front of a house in the suburbs of Hamilton's "mountain." By its exterior the house is just another bungalow, although we notice a few new modifications since our

last visit, including a new roof above the front porch to ward off snow and rain. The unique life of the house only hits us once we step inside. "Hi! Birthday cake, anyone?" Raj calls from the kitchen. Looks like George is another year older. I've heard that the doctors predicted a short life for George, and here he has just turned 69. "Everyone's downstairs," Raj continues. We can hear voices coming from the basement; descending the stairs, we're greeted by the sight of forty people sitting in a circle, including men, women and children ranging in age from two to seventy-five. "Hi Tim!" It's Mary, giving me one of her bear hugs. Dave salutes me from the corner, "Hello, sir Tim!", and Mike jokingly calls out, "Oh no, not you again!" Mike is holding a guitar; calmly strumming the strings; he stands beside a small keyboard played by Stephanie. Kevin, always quiet and polite, stands up to give me his seat, taking a place on the floor. My wife has brought her camera, and takes a picture of our oldest daughter and Janice. Pat calls out "Cheese! Take my picture"; my wife laughs and takes a shot of Pat giving her best smile. This is prayer night at L'Arche Hamilton.

As an organization, L'Arche serves the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities. However, this simple description doesn't capture the vitality of the L'Arche community. For example, as we settle into the circle I realize that someone coming for a first time would have some difficulty determining the "assistants" (staff) from the "core members" (individuals with disabilities served by L'Arche). There is little sense in this

group of any unidirectional process of "care-giving." Instead, the group is a lively, sometimes slightly chaotic bunch of people who all participate to some extent in the prayer night that we've come for. Everyone joins in a chorus of "Happy Birthday" for both assistants and core members who have recently gained another year; children of assistants help with candle-lighting; core members participate in the drama about the apostle Paul; and everyone contributes their requests at prayer time. The songs are often spiritual ("Give Me Oil in My Lamp"), sometimes with a distinct religious message ("Holy Ground"), but always open to participation by everyone. Those who do not sing can join in the songs' hand actions. At the end of the service, everyone exchanges a hug of peace and good will. This has been a special evening for us, even though we've been here a hundred times before. My daughters love coming, and we leave feeling fulfilled and connected. As night descends, the house disappears in our rear-view mirror, appearing once again as simply one of the city's many suburban bungalows.

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L'Arche Hamilton is only one local chapter of L'Arche Canada, itself only one national branch of L'Arche International. The organization traces its origins to Trosly-Breuil, France in 1964, when Jean Vanier (son of Canada's former Governor-General) and Father Thomas Philippe followed a call from God to share their lives and homes with Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, two men with mental disabilities. Vanier and Philippe

were following their interpretation of the Beatitudes as preached by Jesus Christ: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). The name “L’Arche” refers to Noah’s ark, a haven of refuge in the midst of the storm. In spite of its humble beginnings, there are today over 130 L’Arche communities around the world. The first L’Arche communities in Canada were founded in 1969; the most recent Canadian community to be welcomed into the International Federation of L’Arche is Saint John. Communities in the “project stage” include Halifax and Saskatoon. L’Arche Hamilton includes four houses and one apartment hosting nineteen core members, twelve full-time assistants and six part-time assistants. Three assistants work in the day program, which features a candle-making workshop. Six staff work in the central office.

Although on a global scale L’Arche communities represent many different cultures, and reflect ethnic and religious traditions in their respective locales, they share a common philosophy and approach, expressed in the “Charter of L’Arche.” The aims of L’Arche are fourfold:

- to build communities that welcome people with developmental disabilities, and in doing so respond to their sense of rejection and validating their place in society;
- to reveal the gifts and contributions of core members, who constitute the very heart of their communities;
- to be a sign of welcome and respect for the weak and downtrodden; and

- to be a sign of hope, unity, faithfulness and reconciliation in the world between people of differing physical and mental abilities, and of differing social and cultural origins and traditions.

L’Arche is also founded upon social and spiritual principles. All people, regardless of their limitations, are part of a common humanity. While recognizing the need of each individual for personal growth, L’Arche also believes that people need to form relationships with others and with their larger communities. This growth requires environments of trust, security and affection—all are supported and accepted in real relationships. Everyone is of unique and sacred value, and has the right to life, care, to a home, education and to work, as well as the right to love and to be loved, to friendship, communication and the freedom to express spirituality through their own religious tradition. Although having its roots in the Roman Catholic church, L’Arche communities today are often interfaith. Even those communities that are focused on one faith recognize their calling to an ecumenical vocation and to work for unity.

L’Arche affirms the gifts of core members, who serve as a reminder to us of the ‘essential values of the heart’ without which power, action and knowledge lose their meaning and purpose. Following this, weakness is not seen as an obstacle to spiritual fulfillment, but can actually foster spirituality. It is through identifying weakness that the love and strength of God

are revealed. L'Arche communities have at their centre the well-being of core members. In a relationship of mutual love and respect, communities commit themselves to accompany these individuals throughout their lives, if core members desire to live their lives within community. L'Arche communities are places of hope and personal growth, where all members are encouraged to take part in decisions regarding their lives, as far as possible.

All members of L'Arche are called to be one body, living, working, praying and celebrating together as a family. L'Arche communities are also integrated into the larger society, seeking to foster relationships with neighbours and friends outside the community, and with community social networks and centres of activity. In order to fulfill this goal, L'Arche communities work closely with the families and guardians of core members, professionals, government, and with all who seek a spirit of justice and peace for people who are disabled. This sense of family also unites L'Arche on a global basis, as communities assist and pray for one another.

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In one of his letters dated August 2003, Jean Vanier identified the 'essential' element of L'Arche communities: "Presence: being present to people who are fragile; being present to one another." For me, this is more easily said than done. Urban life is fast-paced, with penalties for those who fail to keep up.

My first L'Arche experience was something akin to culture shock. I had just left my job as a manual labourer on a fuel ship, and I had applied to L'Arche through a friend of mine (who became my wife!). My experience of manual labor had not prepared me for the lifework of L'Arche. I found that I was searching for something 'to do' while I was being told to just 'be'. Although I found a few toilets to fix, I quickly realized that my primary responsibility was to develop relationships with the core members and to assist them in their everyday lives, while allowing them the freedom to be as independent as possible. This wasn't always easy. During my first summer at L'Arche I went on vacation to Ottawa with another assistant and several core members, one of whom had difficulty expressing himself verbally, and could become quite aggressive at times. When he was agitated, he would bite his hand, knock himself in the forehead with his fist, and growl. I found that I was afraid of this man, and longed to return to Hamilton. Over the week I gradually began to recognize Roger as a person, and began to overcome my fear. When Roger passed away several years ago, I could truly say that I missed him. I had come to see another side of Roger, that of a man who loved to joke and tease, and who loved music. During my time as a L'Arche assistant, I came to find strength through the friendships that I developed with Roger and with other core members. I loved to play guitar for Pat, who would sing along to familiar songs. Mike and I would jokingly tease each other. I developed similar friendships with Mary and

Laurence. However, the one person who really taught me to rethink disability was Brian.

Brian is a man in his forties who uses hand gestures and a symbol book more than verbal speech. When I first met him, I didn't understand his vocalizations (grunts) or his symbol-book, but Brian understood my speech. I found that Brian was able to use a greater number of media for communication than I could, and yet Brian was the one who was considered to be 'disabled'. I have Brian to thank for the inspiration behind my doctoral dissertation. As I began to question the artificiality of the labels that separated me from Brian, I also began to recognize the importance of breaking down the barriers between our small communities and the world outside of the L'Arche houses. I remember taking Roger to a farm with horse stables out in the country. He loved that job, and did a good job of shoveling manure. I remember participating in water aerobics at a local community centre with some of the women who lived in L'Arche Hamilton. As I have grown older and have a family of my own, I have also grown to realize the importance of connecting my own children to the L'Arche community. The core members have been important examples in the lives of my daughters, awakening them to the value of diversity. My oldest daughter still grieves the death of her friend Kathy. We need this connection for our larger societal community. If we forget to build community *with* those considered weak and poor, then we will all be worse off.



Dr. Timothy Epp is Chair of the Sociology/Social Work department at Redeemer University College. His extra-curricular interests include his wife and kids, cross-country running, music and film. Although he has experienced freefall from 3300 feet, he prefers to keep his feet planted on the ground.

# HAVING IT BOTH WAYS

Karen Hamilton

Churches that are locked up tight most of the time, visibly opening their doors only once a week for a couple of hours, create a problematic atmosphere of an exclusive, fortress mentality. And sometimes it is not even obvious that those solid, wooden doors are open for that couple of hours. They may be technically unlocked, but do they appear welcoming?

Churches with open doors, glass doors, or sandwich boards out front remind the passing world that they are open sanctuaries of prayer, reflection, space, quiet and music; they are, at the very least, an attempt to visibly manifest the divine.

One congregation I know went all out on Easter Sunday and witnessed to life and the divine sense of humour by covering the sidewalk around their building with chalk slogans. Not only “Christ is Risen” but “God is coming, look busy!”

Synagogues with children’s playgrounds outside, mosques and temples with busy parking lots and big, bright notice boards all witness to the vibrancy of faith and life in the city. All of the above structures, especially those with welcoming benches for people to stop and reflect on, contribute to religious communities as problem solvers.

And in the winter, we’ve all seen the ‘Out of the Cold’ programmes. I make a habit and practice of speaking, as often as I can, to those of our sisters and brothers whose circumstances have compelled them to live on the street. Without fail, the response is always that the ‘Out of the Cold’ programmes of the faith communities are the best. Why? Because they treat people with respect, have good food and sometimes even music!

I think that visibility and witness are key to faith communities being problem solvers. But we have to be visible and we have to witness.

A few years back, the Greater Toronto Area experienced one of those all too frequent waves of Anti-Semitism. Swastikas were painted on the doors of Jewish households, among other dastardly deeds. And at the very same time a mosque was fire-bombed. The

response of the Jewish community to the wave of Anti-Semitism was to hold a large, public rally.

One part of that rally was the reading of a letter from a very prominent Muslim Imam condemning the Anti-Semitism, in no uncertain terms. The response of the mosque to its being fire-bombed was to hold a large Open House. People were invited from far and wide. One very striking part of that Open House was the large number of Jewish attendees who came to show their solidarity with their Muslim sisters and brothers. Another striking part of that Open House was the very small number of Christian attendees.

I write as a Christian and so say that Christians have some things to learn yet about being problem solvers in the city. And yet the calling is to journey together with those of all faith traditions to build what we call the "new city."



Rev. Dr. Karen A. Hamilton is General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches. She is committed to speaking about and working for ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue, the use of the Bible in the church and local and global justice.

Her interests also include: training as a classical singer, languages, reading, walking, swimming, piano, movies, travel and engaging conversations.

She is married and has three grown children. The household also includes her plethora of books, active twin kittens and an occasional dog.

# THE CHURCH AND THE BALLET OF STREET LIFE

Eric Jacobsen

*When I get home after work, the ballet is reaching its crescendo. This is the time of roller skates and stilts and tricycles, and games in the lee of the stoop with bottle-tops and plastic cowboys; this is the time of bundles and packages, zigzagging from the drug store to the fruit stand and back over to the butcher's; this is the time when teen-agers, all dressed up, are pausing to ask if their slips show or their collars look right; this is the time when beautiful girls get out of MG's; this is the time when the fire engines go through;*

*this is the time when anybody you know around Hudson Street will go by* (Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961).

In this well known passage from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes what she loves about city neighbourhoods. For her, the neighbourhood is neither a static place nor a group of people who happen to live close to each other, but it is a dynamic interaction of people that takes place when the conditions are just right within a particular locale. It is a ballet that engages you both as an observer and a potential participant.

I love this image from Jacobs and find that it captures what I enjoy most about vibrant neighbourhoods in cities. In this essay, I would like to explore the question of whether churches in neighbourhoods contribute to this loosely choreographed dance or whether they inhibit it.

I don't know a lot about ballet, but as a faithful parent who's been to a few recitals, I think I know the basics of a dance performance. Typically a dance performance requires a stage, dancers, and some rhythms to which the dancers can move. I think that it isn't too much of a stretch to Jacob's metaphor to see if we can break the ballet of street life into these basic components.

We would expect to find the stage for vibrant neighbourhood life in the space between the buildings. As a theatre



stage is bounded by the proscenium arch within which the dancers dance, so also street life is contained by the walls of the buildings that abut the street. Traditionally these walls came right up to the street, creating a kind of outdoor hallway. As one moved down the street, one might find the hallway interrupted by plaza or a monumental building creating the sense of an outdoor room.

However, in the years between 1945 and about 1995, we broke up these traditional forms by building huge surface parking lots that no longer shaped space in the same way. No longer did we have hallways and rooms, but just huge amorphous spaces. Think of a typical Main Street versus the parking lot for Target or Walmart to sense the difference. New churches built during this period, tended to build large campuses with large parking lots. And old churches embedded in neighbourhoods often would knock down adjacent buildings to make large lots as well. Both of these moves worked against the kinds of settings that encouraged a ballet of street life.

With regards to the need for dancers, post-war churches had a negative influence here as well. The addition of a large parking lot changed the way people entered the church. Faithful congregants used to be participants in the dance as they walked through the neighbourhood and then through prominent front doors that could be seen from the street. The new pattern was to zip through the neighbourhood in a car, park, and then

enter and exit the building with no interaction with the streets of the neighbourhood which surrounds the church. If there are still any participants in the dance within the neighbourhoods of our churches, they are not likely to be members of our churches.

This is all very unfortunate because we do have a valuable and unique contribution to make to the dance of street life. Notice how the cadence of Jacobs' dance is keyed to the rhythms of economic life. It is when she gets home from work, that her neighbourhood comes to life. And it is the people's need for various commodities that coax them into the public spaces. This is all well and good, but it could be much richer if the church were part of the dance.

We have some wonderful rhythms that our neighbourhoods won't get to 'hear' so long as our communal movements take place only in the private space of our parking lots and the interior spaces of our churches. We have the weekly Sabbath rhythm of gathering for worship and being sent into the world. We have the seasonal rhythms that shape the year as a journey from Advent to Christmas and then Lent to Easter. And finally, we have life rhythms that celebrate our births, our covenantal commitments to one another, and finally our deaths.

For most of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, churches didn't care too much about the vibrancy of the neighbourhoods that surrounded them. And frankly, there weren't a lot of neighbourhoods that had the kind of vibrancy that Jacobs' extolled

in her book. But all of that is changing. Neighbourhoods are making a comeback and the dance is starting again. I hope that churches figure out how to leave the safety of the wings and join the dance.



Eric Jacobsen is the author of *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Brazos Press, 2003) as well as numerous articles on New Urbanism. He is a member of the Congress for New Urbanism, and a participant in the Colloquium on Theology and the

Built Environment sponsored by St. Andrews University and the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship at Calvin College.

Rev. Jacobsen is the Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Tacoma where he lives with his wife (Liz) and three children Kate (10), Peter (7), and Emma (6). He is a doctoral candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary where he is working in the area of Theology and the Built Environment.

## BEDFORD FALLS AND POTTERSVILLE

Russ Kuykendall

In Frank Capra's classic 1946 film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, the inimitable Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, a small-town building and loan manager. Because of a series of missteps by George's hapless uncle, several thousand dollars in deposits to the building and loan are lost only to fall into the hands of the unscrupulous bank proprietor, Mr. Potter, also known as "Potter." As George and his uncle and the rest of the building and loan staff are scrambling to track down the missing deposit, the bank examiner shows up to audit their books. George takes responsibility for the loss—covering for his uncle—and faces

the prospect of ruin: ruin of the building and loan, personal financial ruin, ruin of his family, and ruin of his reputation, to say nothing of jail time.

George retreats to the local bar where he engages in an altercation, rams his car into a tree along a boulevard, and wanders onto a bridge where he contemplates jumping so his family can receive the benefit of a life insurance policy, exclaiming: "It would be better if I'd never lived."

Clarence, an angel who is trying to earn his wings, appears in order to stop George's jumping. Clarence gives George the gift of seeing what the world might have been like if George Bailey had never lived. George sees the consequences for his brother whom he saved from drowning in a frozen pond, for the men his brother saved in World War II, for George's wife and mother, and for the town of Bedford Falls. Clarence shows George that if he had never lived, the building and loan would have long since failed, and the town of Bedford Falls would have been owned lock, stock, and neighbourhood by Potter. In a world in which George Bailey had never lived, even the town had been renamed, "Pottersville."

While Bedford Falls was a neighbourly place with wide boulevards, beautiful homes owned by families, and independent businesses along its main street, in Pottersville, the families are crammed into tenements, the boulevards are gone, and all the businesses are crass commercial affairs dominated by bars

and strip clubs—mostly owned by and for the enrichment of Potter. Gone are the healthy neighbourhoods and the neighbourliness, and in its place the law of the jungle: every man for himself.

What would a city like, say, Toronto be like if religious and, specifically, Christian influence had never been felt? Let's take a stroll along an eight-block stretch of one Toronto thoroughfare—College Street.

We start at the corner of Yonge and College at the site of the old Eaton's department store with the restored high Art Deco concert hall and its Lalique fountain originally commissioned by Lady Eaton. That takes us past the former site of the Central Toronto YMCA between Yonge and Bay, now one block to the north. Crossing Bay one can see past parallel Dundas Street toward the edge of the financial district. This takes us within a block of Women's College Hospital, past the Canadian Red Cross headquarters, and toward University Avenue past the Toronto "Sick Kids" Hospital, originally founded as the Victoria Hospital for children and the Toronto General, and within sight of the Princess Margaret and Mount Sinai Hospitals. Crossing University takes us just in front of the terminal vista of the Queen's Park site of the Edwardian neoromanesque Ontario Legislature and of Victoria and St. Michael's Universities. Moving west along College takes us into the city blocks which form the University of Toronto campus and another vista terminating

in University College flanked by Knox, Wycliffe, and Trinity Colleges. We carry on as far as Spadina within a block if not in sight of yet another vista terminating in the old King's College building and to the south, several churches including Knox Presbyterian and the old Cecil Street Church of Christ.

What would the city be like if religious—specifically, Christian—influence had never “lived” in Toronto?

There would likely be no Eaton's department store since Timothy Eaton's enterprise and business drive was informed and impelled by his Methodism. There would be no YMCA, since this was a cooperative effort of 19th-century Toronto Protestants of various stripes. There might well be no Dundas Street as we know it or Bay Street financial district since the former was paved by James Beaty, a Christian entrepreneur, and “Bay Street” was built by Ulster Protestants—Presbyterians, Methodists, and Disciples of Christ. There would be no Women's College Hospital—founded as it was because Ontario's first, female, licensed physician, Jessie Kidd Trout, became a physician motivated by her Disciples of Christ faith and impelled by a Christian ethos to found Women's College. Likewise, “Sick Kids” and Toronto General hospitals were organized, funded, and built by Christians acting together and informed by their faith. The same is true of Mount Sinai, founded by Toronto's Jewish community—informed and moved by their faith. The Canadian Red Cross started, again, as a cooperative, Protestant effort spearheaded by Dr. George Sterling Ryerson. The

University of Toronto was founded as a federation of church colleges—the Presbyterian Knox, the Methodist Victoria and Emmanuel, the Anglican Trinity and Wycliffe colleges, and the Catholic St. Michael's. The neoromanesque architecture of the legislature—and the Gothic Revival design of the colleges and hospitals—reflected the faith of their organizers, founders, funders, and builders. And the Cecil Street Church of Christ building provided a spiritual home to Toronto's growing, turn-of-the-century Jewish community when it was converted into a synagogue. Even College Street's streetcars might well not ever have run its length as they still do, had it not been for Christian entrepreneurs and investors impelled by their faith who first created a streetcar system.

The City of Toronto, still, enjoys the fruit of generations of contributions made by these people of faith. They weren't perfect. But, then, that realization on their part was “sort of” the point. The realization that humanity inhabits a world that belongs to God who created it. That ours is a damaged and less than perfect world nonetheless sustained by its Creator, in need of sustained and concerted stewardship and effort directed toward its redemption. That Christians are called and entrusted with the task of “being a blessing” and extending restoration of Creation in all its categories—business and enterprise and high finance, schools and universities, hospitals and medicine, and the voluntary sector and civil society. To encourage and contribute toward the “pluriformity” and “differentiation” of society—

toward a plurality of institutions of all kinds that will contribute toward human flourishing.

To turn cities and towns into “Bedford Falls” . . . and to resist their becoming “Pottersville.”

## CAN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES CONTRIBUTE TO THE HEALTH OF THE CITY?

Paul MacLean

### What makes a ‘healthy community’?

The term ‘healthy community’ (‘strong neighbourhood’ is preferred by the City of Toronto) conveys important current thinking about urban policy. Key points:

- “Health,” “strength” and “safety” require a holistic approach to communities that recognizes the inter-relatedness of many factors—social, economic and ecological.



Russ has worked actively in politics since 1991, and presently serves in the office of a Canadian cabinet minister. From 2004 to 2008, Russ worked with Cardus. He is active in his church, and chairs FLC Canada that works with the Hill Peoples of Laos, Burma, and Thailand engaging in village development, among other things.

- Sectors are inter-related. To create healthy communities, organizations from varied sectors should share knowledge and work together in partnerships.

Healthy communities:

- shape their future by defining their own needs and participating in solutions
- generate internal leadership
- embrace diversity
- know themselves
- connect people and resources
- create a sense of community and foster strong connections
- provide universal access to arts and culture
- are economically and socially vibrant
- steward their natural resources

(from the United Health Foundation)

For example, a key component of building healthy community in the Regent Park Redevelopment is to foster social cohesion and interaction across barriers of income disparity and tenure (length of residency).

## **The role of religious communities in contributing to 'healthy community'**

*Connected or isolated?*

The fundamental question for a religious community is, "Are you part of the ecology of your neighbourhood, or are you an isolated affinity group, gathering only for your own purposes of worship and other related activities?"

Congregations are all somewhere on that spectrum. Demographic change, social upheaval, church leadership, congregational identity and theology all play their part in determining the relationship, or lack of it, between a congregation and its neighbourhood. Few congregations in the GTA draw more than 50% of their members from the neighbourhood, and it's usually much less. This trend can even be seen in some Roman Catholic parishes.

Creating meaningful connections is therefore often a challenge. We can't contribute to the health of a community without being connected.

*Providing a service vs creating a community*

Most congregations want to 'do good' as an expression of their faith. 'Doing good' often gets translated as 'providing a

service' such as food or shelter or a safe place to gather. But is providing a service contributing to health (see the list above), or is it creating dependency? Many congregations have feeding programs that began with church members cooking and serving a meal to 'guests'. In an effort to decrease dependency and create connections across income levels, many of these programs have morphed into 'community meals' in which everyone is invited to contribute to the organization and production of the meal, and everyone eats together, with diminished distinction between haves and have-nots.

#### *Keeping the goal of health in view*

Out of the Cold (OOTC) is another example of churches and synagogues providing a service to alleviate a pressing need for food and shelter. But the goal of the City of Toronto is to radically reduce the need for shelters and replace them with supportive housing options. A positive development is that OOTC is now managed professionally by a social service agency in partnership with religious sponsors, so that issues of health and safety are in the hands of trained personnel. However, OOTC is at best a stepping stone on the way to health. It's not easy for a congregation that puts an enormous volunteer effort into OOTC to keep its eye on the larger goal of getting people into their own, supported housing. Some congregations have had their consciences raised by an OOTC program, and

now put their energies into creating housing, as a longer term response to the need for shelter.

#### *What are our assets and who are they for?*

The key assets of a congregation are its faith, people, money and buildings. Do the material assets contribute to the building of healthy community? The answer depends on the vision of the congregation and its key values—expressed through volunteer energy, money spent, and building usage. Is the vision simply survival or does it include the flourishing of people outside its membership?

The reality is not simple. Many congregations want to contribute to the betterment of human society and see this as part of God's purpose for them. However, they also need to sustain their own life and their primary purpose of worshipping God, and many have dwindling resources. A number of urban congregations have addressed these challenges and refused to focus exclusively on their own survival. They have engaged in serious discernment of their vision, reconsidered their assets, and entered into creative amalgamations with other congregations or partnerships with outside organizations. A "resource crisis" has led to spiritual renewal with an outward focus.

*Assets you can't count*

Measurement is synonymous with value in our society: "If you can't count it, it doesn't count." Are we making progress? How can we tell? Funding depends upon the answers. But there are some contributions congregations can make that can't be measured.

1. Faith is the motivation that drives people out of their comfort zone into caring deeply for others and into learning how to be more effective in their caring. Small groups of passionately faithful people can make a significant difference beyond their numbers. People of faith have made common cause with those of other faiths or no faith to lead community change.
2. Healthy communities need sacred spaces in which to express collectively their triumphs and disasters, their anxieties and joys. On December 6, 1989 following the Montreal Massacre, a huge crowd carrying candles spontaneously assembled at St. Joseph's Oratory—a moving example of the collective need to express profound grief in a common and sacred space.
3. A community with self-knowledge has the capacity to remember and tell its story, thereby giving value to the people and intangible events and sacrifices that have made the community what it is. This function is performed by community groups, historical associations,

schools, artists and newspaper columnists. The role of congregations is to lift up the sacred dimension of the story, especially the experiences of the marginalized, so that nothing of value is lost.

**Conclusion**

Contributing to the creation of healthy urban communities presents significant challenges to congregations, but through faith, space and story they have a unique contribution to make to the health of the city.



Paul is the executive director of Potentials, a unique Canadian ecumenical centre for the development of ministry and congregations. He led the founding of Potentials in 1995 and has guided the organization through its development over the past twelve years to its present, highly respected position as a key resource for Canadian churches. Paul brings to this organization a deep belief in the power of congregations to transform both the lives of individuals and society.



# THE PROBLEM PEOPLE

Peter Menzies

People of faith are a huge problem for our cities.

Their institutions, after all, don't conform to modern planning presumptions. Municipal planners charged with overseeing the development of a modern, progressive, secular society feel they can't treat churches, synagogues, temples or mosques differently from other institutions. Everyone understands that, right?

A parking bylaw has to be applied in a cookie cutter fashion that pretty much eliminates the possibility of new churches, mosques, synagogues or temples being built anywhere near the downtown core of Canada's modern, progressive, secular cities. We all get that, right?

There is only room for them on the fringes of cities which, apparently, is where they belong: physically, intellectually and emotionally out of the sight and out of the minds of modern, progressive, secular societies. In places such as Calgary—Canada's second largest head office and financial centre—institutions of faith have been so completely eliminated from the civic planning mindset that they aren't even mentioned in that city's massive new Centre City plan which calls for increasing downtown densities to levels beyond those currently experienced in Manhattan. Instead, they are encouraged to build relatively big-box structures on available lots in industrial parks and further out where people trekking to their weekly worship won't disrupt others. Yes, it is inconvenient for those who wish to attend to their souls—particularly on a Sunday morning when public transit service is at a minimum—but it is, after all, just church. Land lots on the outskirts are large enough to allow for the parking spaces that are required even though they are only used to their capacity at most two or three times a week and then not during peak periods.

Christians at least can still find the remnants of their culture within the cores of Canada's cities. Anecdotally, the further east one treks, the greater the presence of churches within the hearts of cities. Halifax, for instance, has several prominent structures right in the soul of the city. And the cathedrals of Quebec City, Montreal and Toronto—while clearly past their prime—are inescapable influencers of civic aesthetic. As one moves west,

the cities are younger, the architecture is more Presbyterian and less imposing than Anglican or Roman Catholic structures; here urban churches had only experienced two or three generations of congregations prior to the suburban exodus that occurred in post Second World War North America.

Nevertheless, there are prominent Christian structures serving the spiritual needs of a wide variety of denominations within the cores of cities such as Calgary.

People of other, newer faiths are a bigger problem. Encouraged to come to a country with a birth rate so low it must depend on immigrants to sustain economic growth and prosperity, generations of new Canadians have broadened the nation's faith spectrum. Muslims in Calgary now have three comprehensive structures, including Canada's largest mosque. Immigrants from Asia and South Asia have brought greater prominence and numbers to Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh faiths, all of which are establishing new temples and a physical presence for their beliefs in our cities. That physical presence in turn shapes the cultural tone and feel of our cities.

There is, however, no place for these in the downtown core of our cities. Oh, there is allegedly room for immigrants from Iran, Pakistan, India, China and Indonesia in our civic cores to work and to attend arts, sports and other events appropriate to a modern, progressive, secular society. But there is little or, in

the case of Calgary, no room for them to gather for prayer unless they wish to do so on the fringes of the city.

So far, this has contributed to a pattern of settlement in which people of certain faiths establish themselves in a particular part of our cities—typically suburban areas where home prices are within reach of new immigrants. Once there, the community will establish a faith institution nearby to serve its needs. And, once the faith institution is established, the community's roots are embedded.

The challenge for civic planners is that for many in these communities, faith is not an aspect of life that is segregated within the agreed-upon template of a modern secular society. For them, and also for certain segments of the Christian and Jewish communities, faith and life remain completely intertwined. So if a city such as Calgary, for instance, wishes to build a civic core in which people of all backgrounds are genuinely to feel welcome, such a laudable goal cannot be achieved without the establishment of institutions of faith within those cores. Pushing the development of those structures to the metaphorical and literal outer edges of society ensures only that the vast majority of those attracted to life in the civic core are those for whom faith plays a lesser role in their lives.

A line is therefore drawn. Thus emerges the awkward possibility of societies segregated on the basis of belief and culture. Believers will trend towards settlement in those parts of the city

in which institutions which serve their faiths and cultural needs exist. There, they can feel more whole. Others will trend elsewhere and soon, rather than building the inclusive multicultural society which has been central to Canada's social goals, its people will increasingly live separate lives. The reality of unofficial but very real separate Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and indeed even Christian communities will continue to form.

Canada's cities, if they fail to integrate faith into their civic core planning, are encouraging segregated rather than integrated societies.

People of faith are a problem that doesn't seem inclined to go away. Given their reputations as incubators of virtuous social behaviour, they could be an opportunity but if that is to be exploited the relationship between faith and a modern, progressive, secular society needs to be rethought.



Peter Menzies is the Alberta-Northwest Territories commissioner for the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), past publisher and editor-in-chief of one of Canada's major daily newspapers and a Cardus Senior Fellow.

Still an occasional author, Menzies' journalism career spanned 30 years. Starting at a small weekly on Vancouver Island, he built an international award-winning career at the *Calgary Sun* and *Calgary Herald*, where he served as a successful publisher—building circulation and growing profits—and as editor-in-chief from 1998 to 2006.

# BUILDING A CITY OF GOD

Joe Mihevc

There is a wonderful hymn that is sung frequently in the church that I attend. The hymn is called “City of God” and its refrain has the line “let us build a city of God, let our tears be turned into laughter.” When the congregation sings the song, I often wonder what images and thoughts people have on what this “city of God” looks like.

As a city councillor, I struggle with this question every day. Of course, in a civic context, city councillors do not use religious language in political and administrative debates and discussions. Yet discussions about civic matters are inevitably discus-

sions about values and ethics, about figuring out the “right” thing to do, about building a city of value and meaning. For a person coming from a faith background, and in this case a Christian one, speaking about building a city of God is a way of articulating the deepest values that inform one’s politics.

When people of faith think about building a city of God, it is very fair to ask the question about its features. Does a city of God support urban sprawl or does it favour increasing density? Are high rise buildings a sign of God’s presence? Does God’s city enjoy low taxes and few city services or higher taxes because the services are stronger? How well built is public transit? Is the library system strong? What happens with homeless people? Are community agencies serving new immigrants and refugees supported? How strong is the police department? Are there poor in this city and if so, what services should the city provide and what supports should rest with the voluntary, including the church, sector?

We often think of these kinds of questions as solely secular or civic questions. Indeed we might even say these are political questions so far removed from the affairs of faith that it is laughable to consider civic public policy in a religious framework. Politics and faith are like oil and water, each relegated to its own realm with very little point of interface.

Yet Christians know that the affairs of the city are the affairs of faith. Christian faith beckons us to take the world seriously, to take history-making seriously, to build a better world worthy of God and one that incorporates the highest Christian values and principles.

The history of Christian Churches in Canada actually gives testament to the active involvement of Christians in the affairs of the city. In the 1930s, the church's leadership and congregants rallied around poor and homeless people suffering in the Depression. They formed all kinds of community kitchens, feeding programs, and direct service.

Their work only began there. The Churches led the charge to have the municipal, provincial and federal governments enact policies against poverty. Petitions to lawmakers, articles by pastors in newspapers, homilies decrying the misery in the city, support for union organizing, meetings with government officials at all levels—in all these ways, churches advocated for social welfare and justice.

Interestingly enough, the direct frontline charity work informed the churches' more prophetic addresses to those with political power. Works of mercy were simply not enough. Addressing the root causes of poverty, and promoting strategies to overcome its effects during the Depression, were understood as part and parcel of developing one's faith in an urban context.

As a civic official with a faith background, I look to those days with much pride and great longing. I am proud to be a part of that tradition in my own understanding of my political work. The longing unfortunately comes from a sense that those days are behind us and the current climate in the churches finds these voices increasingly rare.

It is interesting to reflect on the ways in which city councillors interact with faith-based communities these days. The dominant ways that church people have come to city hall offices in the last decade has been firstly to deal with development applications for their places of worship, and secondly to ask for the city's help in managing parking issues. These are signs that the churches are focusing internally on religious services and maintaining membership rather than its public mandate of building the city of God.

This inward focus comes at a time of social and economic upheaval, and a period of lack of faith in our political institutions. Now is precisely the time when we need to interject public policy debates with questions of ethics. With the widening gap of the wealthy and the poor in our city, the level of homelessness, the lack of affordable housing, the hunger experienced by our school children, Torontonians are looking for voices of moral leadership encouraging policy-makers in the right direction. This is the expertise and proper domain of the Churches;

that is, to speak truth to power, to remind the state to build community and to make the needs of the poor central to its task.

There are of course wonderful examples of faith-inspired public activity that persist. The provincially-focused Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) continues to call the province to deal with poverty and social assistance. Catholic religious sisters worked with the city to create 60 units of affordable housing in Scarborough. Several Out of the Cold programs continue to feed and support homeless members of our community.

There are many other examples of Christian individuals and congregations who inspire social engagement. The challenge for the Christian community is to have the work of these exceptional individuals become the norm for all church members. Indeed, losses in church membership may be a function of the lack of relevancy to people who want to be part of communities that build a better city and a better world. Arousing a sleeping set of churches to the social mandate of the Gospel is the challenge before the Christian community. To me, being a Christian means to participate in the building of a City of God.



Joe Mihevc has served as Councillor for the former City of York and now the new City of Toronto for the last eighteen years, bringing his deep concern for social issues in advocating for stronger neighbourhoods, healthy communities, clean environment and safe streets. With a Ph.D. in theology and social ethics, Councillor

Mihevc has served in a variety of capacities that have allowed him to demonstrate his concerns for democratic, accessible and responsible government, including chairing the City's Community Services Committee, the Roundtable on Access and Equity and Human Rights, the Disability Issues Committee and the Ethics Steering Committee.

# KEEPING THE FAITH — BUILDING AND RE-BUILDING CHURCHES IN THE CITY

Glenn R. Miller

Last year, I helped organize a conference entitled “Planning in Good Faith,” which looked at the role of faith organizations in cities. For the most part, our focus was on the physical elements—the churches, synagogues and mosques—that comprise such an important part of the public realm in our cities and towns.

One of the areas of concern discussed at the conference was how to respectfully—and practically—balance our desire to preserve built heritage with the failing economics of declining congregations. Some presenters suggested that the demand for new church buildings (and other faith-based structures) in fast-growing suburbs presents headaches for the planning staff of suburban municipalities. Built to serve a clientele willing to drive long distances, the design and programming requirements of these places has more in common with shopping malls than places of worship.

As a planner interested in helping create solutions to the complexities of urban living, I found the range and depth of issues uncovered by “Planning in Good Faith” quite astonishing. Nearly a decade into the 21st century, we still seem to be clueless when it comes to solving very basic issues. In truth, nobody should be surprised that today’s brand new places of worship respond to the same dictates as any other type of development—that is, being built for the car. I think I detected a sense of disappointment among the attendees that—with some notable exceptions—today’s religious buildings are unlikely to be on anyone’s list of heritage structures 50 years from now. In fact, redevelopment within the decade seems to be the more likely fate awaiting these often cheaply-built sheds.

Within the planning profession, there are concerns over the popularity of “temporary” buildings (not confined to places of

worship), related to the sense of waste inherent in developing purely for the very short term. But from a community-building point of view, the message is even more harsh: compared to the solid, often beautifully-crafted buildings from another generation, the notion of building a place of worship as a fleeting gesture seems antithetical to the motivations that inspire a congregation to come together in the first place.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that some of the most vibrant congregations are those that thrive in borrowed spaces in retail strips and the basements of office buildings. How do we make sense of these obviously conflicting philosophies? Perhaps we don't have to.

The point—made forcefully by at least one presenter at the conference—is that the very act of fundraising, designing, building and managing a place of worship is what is important. Anecdotal evidence suggests this might be right. Take the experience of a good friend of mine who has carved out a specialty as an architect working with church congregations. I have followed her travails for over a decade, during which time she has developed close relationships with more than a dozen congregations in southern Ontario. The results are always stunning, reflecting not only her talent as a designer but extraordinary levels of commitment from the congregations.

There seem to be some common denominators.

Notwithstanding what we hear about shrinking congregations, the groups my friend works with seem to be universally well organized and extremely dedicated to their cause. The search for funds doesn't seem to be a problem either—although this may be a function of the wealth that exists in southern Ontario.

If there is a vision, a way will be found to source the money necessary to put that vision into practice. In an age when we hear that society is becoming unglued and divisive, these congregations seem to be able to rally to a worthwhile cause, whether it is to add space to an existing church, to allow for community meetings or the provision of volunteer social services. When headlines in the newspaper complain about the lack of affordable housing, it is the church groups that begin thinking about the provision of housing units on church land. These groups seem happy to grapple with the challenge of finding a balance between preserving built heritage and making the most of resources for the good of society. There is also acknowledgment that, in the case of older churches and other place of worship, receiving a break on property taxes represents a tangible rationale for leveraging church assets to pursue social goals.

Another constant is the approach of these dedicated congregations to time: we hear a lot about how rushed modern society is, and how there are never enough hours in the day to get everything done. Tell that to my friend the architect: night



meetings, day meetings, weekend meetings, holiday meetings—she does them all, because her clients demand them. To be fair, they ask nicely, but the bottom line is that the vision for their congregation is that there is work to be done, and they are willing to put in the time, often showing a willingness to learn about arcane planning regulations, quirks of the building code and other challenges.

There is also a strong commitment to being environmentally responsible. My architect friend tells me that her clients are often willing to undertake extra fundraising to cover the costs of adding solar, geexchange or green roofs.

Now if only these saintly values could be extended to all redevelopment activities—that would really represent planning in good faith.



Glenn R. Miller, FCIP, RPP, is Vice President, Education and Research with the Canadian Urban Institute in Toronto, where he is responsible for a diverse portfolio of research, innovation and education. Glenn is also founding editor of the *Ontario Planning Journal*, the professional practice magazine of the Ontario Professional Planners Institute. In 2005, he was elected as a Fellow of the Canadian Institute of Planners.

## A 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY REFORMATION: RESHAPING FIRST WORLD RELIGION AROUND THE POOR

Greg Paul

A version of this article was originally presented to the Urban Forum, in Cleveland (Ohio), January 27-30, 2008.

Saint Lawrence, one of the earliest and most venerated martyrs of the church, was a Deacon of Rome when he was put to death during the Emperor Valerian's persecution of Christians in 258 AD. While only the date and location of his martyrdom

can be corroborated historically, it's the details in the stories which were passed around a fragmented and diasporic Church for a few hundred years afterward that are truly fascinating.

Lawrence was the treasurer of the Roman church, and as such had also responsibility for the care of the poor. The Praefect of Rome—the mayor, more or less—had heard rumours that the church was in possession of a great treasure. Summoning Lawrence on the same day in which the Pope, Sixtus, had already been put to death, the Praefect demanded the treasure be turned over to the Roman government, and threatened Lawrence with execution if he did not comply quickly.

A perplexed Lawrence replied at first that the church possessed little of real material value; seeing that the Praefect did not believe him, and was growing angry, he sought and was granted three days in which to gather the “treasure.” He spent those three days selling what he could of church property, and dispersing the proceeds among the poorest people of the city.

At the appointed time, he requested that the Praefect meet him on the colonnaded steps of the Praefectorium. There was no gold or silver to be seen. Instead, the steps were jammed with the dregs of the Roman slums—beggars, prostitutes, people who were old, infirm or diseased, street urchins, runaway slaves and old soldiers who were losing their war with wine.

“Here,” declared Lawrence, “are the true treasures of the church. The Church is truly rich, far richer than your emperor.”

The Praefect, apparently, didn't think it was funny. He immediately condemned Lawrence to a particularly nasty death—he had him roasted on a gridiron. Ambrose of Milan claims that, during his torture, Lawrence cried out “This side's done; turn me over and have a bite.”

Not many tales of early church martyrs are so whimsically humorous. That alone gives the unconfirmable but consistently repeated details of Lawrence's death the ring of truth, but what is even more certain is what they convey about the church's vision of itself through the roughly four hundred years afterward.

The church's first responsibility was understood not to be or even submit to imperial or civil powers, but to stand with and for the poorest and most vulnerable people in society. It was not money or respectability or safety which mattered most, but the currency of relationship. *At the very heart of the identity of the church were those people who were rejected and unvalued elsewhere.*

This was how the church viewed itself for at least the first six or seven hundred years of its existence.

Alan Hirsch, in his insightful book *The Forgotten Ways*, points out that this first period of the church's existence was a time of exponential growth: from the death of Christ until about 100 AD, it grew from a couple of hundred uncertain followers

to perhaps 25,000; over the next 200 years (by 310 AD) there were as many as 20,000,000 disciples spread throughout the world—disciples who were poor, rejected and often actively persecuted.

Can it be that the church is most fruitful, and the good news of the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ over all forms of sin and death is most potently presented, when her people are materially and politically weak?

The oldest cathedral in the world is the St. Domnius Cathedral in Split, Croatia. It was constructed about 300 AD, just one short generation after the martyrdom of St. Lawrence, when Christianity was still illegal. Built by the Roman emperor Diocletian as his own tomb, it became a church only a generation or two after his death; Diocletian's remains were removed and replaced with those of Domnius, the bishop of Salona, whom Diocletian had executed during his own violent attempts to suppress the followers of Jesus.

A visitor today will mark the church by its tall and beautiful steeple tower, added in the 14th Century, and will pay a fee to enter and view its spectacular collection of art and carvings, including portraits of Roman persecutors of the church made back when that was an honourable profession. For an extra 15 Kuna, one may ascend a narrow set of stairs and view selected

items from what a hand-lettered sign describes as 'the Treasure of the Church'.

This treasure is all brocaded surplices seven or eight hundred years old, jeweled crosses, mitres, chalices, and staffs of silver and gold, extravagantly bound Bibles, and elaborate reliquaries containing—often displaying—the bones of saints, grey with age. It's fabulous stuff, though a little grisly. Of course, no self-respecting medieval church is without such a treasury, and most are far richer than that of St. Domnius.

Is it any wonder that the Reformation came to pass when the importance of a church—its treasure—was measured by the extent of its collection of bones and gold, housed in soaring symbols of power? The flying buttresses, immense vaulted ceilings and dramatic stained glass windows, the gold, silver and jewels all evidenced the worldly power of the Church; the dry, discolored bones provided a tragic metaphor for her true spiritual state.

By the time Martin Luther introduced his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, the poor, weak church which had spread throughout the Roman and Byzantine world like yeast through a batch of dough had become a powerful entity whose political, economic and military might dominated the western world. The popes had, for a few hundred years, maintained armies of their own, as well as manipulating, by means of the sale of indulgences and threats of excommunication (the classic carrot and stick),

most of the armies of Europe. They crowned kings and exacted tribute from them.

How truly different is the Protestant church, which Luther helped found, today? At least in her First World, evangelical form, she seems to have been seduced by money and power. She has nurtured a culture of exclusivism (there are hundreds of different evangelical denominations in North America), and made an art form of squeezing desperate people for what little they have—the prayer hankies, special oils and promises of wealth offered by unscrupulous televangelists aren't much different than the indulgences which so inflamed Luther and other Reformers.

Furthermore, First World evangelicals tend overwhelmingly to be middle-class and upwards, with the notable exception of African-American congregants living in large urban centers or poor rural areas in the southern US. This means that, as a group, we are firmly ensconced in the top four or five percent of the world's wealthiest people. Evangelical cathedrals of glass and steel, replete with hi-def video screens, elaborate audio equipment, book stores, coffee bars and large dedicated spaces that get used for only a few hours each week, get built to comfort congregations that routinely send their youth on expensive 'missions trips' to poor foreign countries, but the poor of their own communities are not to be found within those cathedral

walls. They are places where the mob who jammed the steps of the Roman Praefectorium are decidedly not welcome.

The Church, by 1500, had become a tragic caricature of itself. She desperately needed a radical adjustment of her character. At the beginning of the second millennium, the Church in its evangelical First World form has departed just as surely and widely from the kind of vital, costly and inspiring Christian community for which Lawrence of Rome so willingly spent himself.

We are a people desperately in need of reformation.

One phrase of Scripture was enough to reclaim the gospel which had been buried under the excesses of the medieval Church: the revelation that "the just shall live by faith" lit a fire in the heart of the young monk in Wittenburg, and swept through Europe. Could it be the words of another Old Testament prophet, quoted by another New Testament figure—the Christ Himself, this time—that will scour the grime from the gospel in the 21st Century?

Starting such a reformation may seem daunting, but there is good news! Anyone anywhere can begin their own reformation, and no person or group has responsibility for making it happen widely—only God can do that.

Any privileged individual can choose to seek out and make friends with people who have less. Anyone with money can choose to give, not just out of his or her excess, but even in such

a way that it requires a ‘downsizing’ of his or her manner of living. Any worshipper can choose to gather with a congregation that includes people who are poor and excluded, instead of a congregation of socio-economic peers. Any student preparing for a career, or any worker changing careers, can choose an occupation because it will benefit people who are disadvantaged, instead of merely because it offers the best possibility of personal economic advancement.

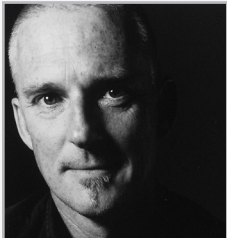
Anyone may cultivate an attitude “the same as that of Christ Jesus” —the attitude of “downward mobility,” of living humbly among people who are weak, rejected, destitute. (In fact, Paul tells us, this should be the attitude of all believers.) Young people establishing their first homes, older people retiring and moving to smaller residences, in fact individuals and families of any age or situation, can choose to locate in lower income neighbourhoods instead of in the priciest area they can afford.

Church and denominational leaders could actually lead, as did Luther and others. They could encourage church plants in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods instead of in areas where the economic demographics are favorable. They could encourage their church members by example (that’s what leading is, after all) to get out of the church building and into the alley. One church with which I have a relationship shut down its weekend services, sacrificing that week’s revenue from 6,000 congre-

gants (at a time when they were already behind budget!), and placed 3,000 volunteers in inner city justice ministries instead. What a great beginning! Truly visionary leaders might encourage the disposal of church properties which, by location or ergonomics, mitigate against welcoming people who are poor, and look for radically different ways in which their congregations can engage with the “true treasures of the church” in their own localities. My own experiences in visiting a wide range of churches in Canada and the US indicates that leaders who begin to move in such directions may find that a substantial percentage of their congregations are already out there ahead of them!

We may find, in the process, that we need to lose the term “evangelical” in order to redeem the evangel. We may find that it’s a relief in some ways, and a huge missional empowerment in others, to off-load massive church property overheads. Church staffers more focused on offering grassroots pastoral care in the tenements and on the streets of their “parish” than on the production of a tightly-scripted Sunday service may find that the gospel comes alive in a new way, and their work fulfills rather than drains them. We might actually see groups of Christians beginning to live like the body of Christ, sharing their daily lives in a variety of ways, becoming “seven-days-a-week churches.” We might discover that denominational distinctives mean less, and that encouraging each other to actually follow Jesus means more.

In one who is hungry, addicted, unemployed, battered or diseased, we may reform and rediscover the heart of religion itself.



Greg Paul is a member of the Sanctuary community in Toronto. Many of his greatest faith teachers come from among the people struggling with poverty, homelessness, addiction or mental illness who form the core of that community. He's passionate about rhythm'n'blues, boats, bicycles and, alas, the Toronto Maple Leafs.

## A MIXED BAG

Ray Pennings

Religious communities, like all other communities, are a mixed bag. In them we find nice people and not so nice people, worthwhile projects and some downright foolish ones, great solutions and incestuous problems.

One could pull out a balance sheet. Add up the solution assets; subtract the problem liabilities and *voilà*, we can measure the contribution of religion to the city. Most recognize, however, that such an approach misses the heart of the question. Quite apart from what religious communities do, there are some who will view them as a problem because of what they are. And conversely, there are those who suggest that an

important part of the contribution of religious communities to the city is their simple presence. Count me in the latter group.

Let me hasten to add that does not mean I turn a blind eye to the foolishness, misguided zeal, and sometimes cantankerous and divisive role that religionists sometimes play. Religion is not an unmitigated good. But—and this is the vital point that needs to be considered in the discussion—religious communities are a necessary part of the city because religion is an essential part of being human.

Even those who contest the point will only rarely dispute the historical reality that the vast majority of people who have walked on this planet are religionists. I would argue that all of them are since we all have something that we believe about ultimate reality. Usually we utilize the term religion to refer to those persons who have some form of deity in their ultimate reality. Hence, the term “religious communities” brings with it, in the minds of most, some association with worship and worship practices.

Many operate on the presumption that worship and religion really is a private matter, and a religious community is simply an amalgamation of like-minded individuals who meet together to share their common interest, in the same way as a group of bridge players may meet on a regular basis to enjoy their social pastime. For the most part, religion was seen as benign and in fact, when we took the measure of the social good provided by

the generosity of religionists, it was recognized that it contributed to solving many problems. The key, however, was that we viewed the contribution of religion not as in itself a public good, but as a private motivator for individuals to contribute to the public good. Worship itself, and the identity of religious communities, had as little public import and significance as the motivation of techniques on a hockey team. What mattered and counted was what they did on the ice; who cares what motivated them to be there?

In the last decade or so, there has been a significant change of thinking on this. There are a few who, claiming religious sanction for their actions, have engaged in destructive and problematic behavior. Suddenly, what happens inside churches, temples, and mosques where religious communities gather became the focus of greater concern. What was being taught was no longer only of private consequence but now impacted all of us. Religion is no longer viewed as a benign activity that individuals can have in their private moments, but rather something of potential danger that can affect us all. It is something that has public consequences.

I would argue that religion always has been public in nature. Given that we do not agree regarding religion (and there really never has been a society where there was comprehensive religious agreement—when it appears that way, it just means religious difference has been pushed below the surface), the essence of the question before us comes to light: How do reli-

gious communities (plural) contribute to public life? Given that ultimate truth claims are at the essence of religion and given that most ultimate claims are mutually exclusive, the real question regarding the overall contribution of religion must deal with the question of living together with differences. How do we respect each other, share the benefits and public goods offered by differing religious groups, while providing the space for each to hold onto and maintain very different views and practices?

There are no easy answers. But two observations will provide context for my assertion that religious communities are an essential part of solving problems in our cities. First, the fundamental nature of religion and religious communities needs to be affirmed as part of what it means to be human. *We are worshipping creatures.* That has consequences: not only personally, but also how for we relate to others and form communities. A significant reason for our present challenge in understanding the role of religion in public life is the mistaken secular thesis that religion can be put into a private box. It never could. When we tried, all we were doing was privileging secular religionists as having a preferential place in the public square. Being a tolerant pluralist, I am all for defending the rights of secularists to make their point, but living in a securocracy is hardly all that it is made out to be. And, to get back to the question of whether religious communities solve or make problems, my first answer is that the *absence* of religious communities creates far bigger problems than their *presence*.

Only if we respect the religious communities of our cities will we have a basis for discussing their benefits and challenges. We need to develop a groundwork of civil conversation, which presupposes mutual respect and a willingness to tolerate difference while working in a common commitment to a shared good. Only this will allow for the searching and sharing which is part of the humanity-wide search for meaning and truth.



Ray Pennings is Senior Fellow and Director of Research at Cardus, working out of his Calgary office, where he lives with his wife Kathy and son, Chris. Ray is a recognized political activist, having held senior positions on campaign teams in municipal, provincial and federal politics. He can often be found making presentations on Parliament Hill, contributing to newspapers and periodicals across Canada and regularly appearing on political talk shows.



# CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Mark Petersen

I sat at the table chewing furiously on an overcooked steak. Across from me was a former evangelical pastor, in tears, who told of his crisis of faith and recent decision to abandon his role at his church. His belief system had been shaken to the core when the horrifying truth dawned on him: he no longer held to certain tenets of the tradition he had been preaching for ten years. A literal interpretation of Scripture, a six-day creation, and commitment to male leadership in the church—all these issues became sharp sticking points for my friend. While he

continued to follow Christ wholeheartedly, he couldn't make the rational leap to affirm some doctrines of his particular community.

But worse than the angst of his own personal dilemma was the intolerance for divergent opinion that existed in his congregation. His church had not been a safe place for people to ask questions, admit doubt, probe truth, and express diversity of thought and practice. Anyone who didn't toe the party line was suspect, driving out those that couldn't subscribe to the moralistic majority. It was the kind of religious group that seems to get overexposed in national media and on YouTube, driving the impression that the church is filled with the intolerant.

In this case, push came to shove, and it was the pastor who had to leave. So he resigned, seeking to serve God and his community outside the confines of the religious establishment.

It's a story I'm hearing with greater frequency, as a growing number of theological refugees exit inward-looking congregations to meet in homes and coffee shops, and serve those outside the church doors. These people have not abandoned their commitment to Christ; they've left behind their allegiance to a religious system that can't cope with diversity of thought and practice.

Churches and denominations more interested in fighting theological battles talk to themselves—loud, strident voices lead

the debates that echo through the empty church building and in anonymous online forums. When they do focus outward, it is to seek the vulnerable, proselytizing others to a proscribed way of thinking. This rigid sequence is clear: you must believe our way before you can belong.

These last vestiges of a modern spirituality, based on a dated worldview, rear up intolerantly when pressed into the corner by a globalized culture. Quibbling over words, and stocking our warehouse buildings with comfortable stacking chairs and PowerPoint projectors, these Christians seem to have all the answers. But we've forgotten how to humbly say "I don't know," as well as "I'm sorry." And we've resisted learning how to live as people who follow Christ in the midst of the diversity of a complex culture.

My friend's story would be utterly depressing if it were not for the many more people I meet on a daily basis who demonstrate the flipside of an ingrown spirituality. Many are choosing an activist faith that takes one into the riskier alleyways and soup kitchens of service. While it is "safer" to not venture outside the church walls, the more challenging option seems to prevail, often without the official sanction of a denomination or church.

These bold adventurers, motivated by a passionate faith and often some lingering doubts, are oriented towards serving people outside their four walls. They have chosen to sacrifice

the comforts of predictability, to follow Christ into the streets, institutions and businesses of the city. Enmeshing themselves into the broader social fabric, they are net contributors, offering service and life to all with no strings attached. Incorporating themselves into the broader community, eyes blinking as entering a bright room, they lean into inclusive approaches marked by actions before words. They'll offer a sandwich before an explanation.

My work brings me face-to-face with spectacular examples of hidden Christians who have organized themselves to live sacrificial lives of loving service in their communities. Here are a few lesser known stars in the night sky:

*Gateway Centre for New Canadians* in Mississauga, Ontario flings open the doors of their community centre to welcome hundreds of immigrants a month, including 250 Muslims who use the Christian centre for weekly Friday prayers.

*A Rocha's* community models sustainable environmental conservation through its leadership role in protecting the Little Campbell Watershed in South Surrey, B.C. and parts of the Pembina Valley in southern Manitoba.

*My People Internation* has a team that travels to remote indigenous communities in Canada's vast northland, offering workshops and counseling for First Nations communities facing high suicide rates and sexual abuse.

*Word Made Flesh* patterns itself after Mother Teresa, living in the bowels of gritty urban poverty and loving neighbours who are prostitutes, street kids, and war amputees in places like Kolkata, India and Freetown, Sierra Leone.

*Prison Fellowship Canada's* many volunteers visit those who never receive visitors, and offer prisoners skills and networks to adapt to post-prison life.

What is this dangerous journey we are called to as those who follow Christ outside the walls of our religious systems? It's one that does not reinforce and bulk up one's own religious establishment, imposing burdensome regulations and expectations on people. In fact, those were the types that Christ seemed to have the greatest issues with in His life. Instead, those who believe Jesus is Lord imitate his trajectory downward and outward—He gave up His rights and came to serve; His life is an offering for all. In like manner, followers of Christ identify with and serve others with great tolerance and respect, even when differences abound. Approaches such as these create the environment for trust to be nurtured, and for transformation to be gifted to a community.



Mark Petersen is the Executive Director of the Bridgeway Foundation, based in Cambridge, Ontario. He leads Bridgeway's daily operations, resulting in the strengthening of 85 organizations in 2007. He also directs Bridgeway's annual awards program which highlights innovative best practices in the social sector.

Most recently he is the author of a blog on faith and philanthropy entitled *Open Hands*.

# THE CHURCH UNSEEN?

Paul Rowe

Cairo—Egypt’s capital and most populous city—is a chaotic hub of economic, cultural, and political activity. It is also deeply religious. Mosques dot the landscape of the city, becoming local nerve centres for the citizens as they go about their daily prayers. The city hums in resonance as its population is called to prayer five times a day. Christian youth flock to weekly question-and-answer sessions with the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. But behind the richly textured sights and sounds of the city’s mosques and minarets, religious institutions provide far more than is readily apparent.

The city of Cairo, while predominantly Muslim, also has an historically strong Christian presence. For the Christian Zabellin, the city’s garbage collectors, participation in the church has had a profound impact on their community and the city itself.

The Zabellin live on the outskirts of the city collecting, sorting, recycling, and selling its garbage. They provide an indispensable service to the city and many have actually made a good living out of their lifestyle, but the lifestyle is a malodorous and undesirable one which has consigned the Zabellin to an area on the fringe of Cairo known as the “garbage village.” The streets are grimy, uneven, and full of refuse. Families live in makeshift homes where garbage is sorted on the bottom floor, while people live in the upper floors.

Until the 1980s, the thousands of Christians who inhabited the garbage village had no churches, because Egypt maintains rules intended to limit and politicize the construction and refurbishment of churches. Moreover, the mainly Coptic Christians who lived in garbage city had difficulty accessing the churches within the city because of the distance and stigma associated with their profession.

However, a priest with a vision came to the garbage village and began a church. Over time, the church grew into a network of several churches which transformed the community by establishing schools, health clinics, and churches. Despite

the transformation, the newly formed churches had to solve the problem of not being able to build church buildings. The answer came with the discovery of a series of natural caves. The excavation of these caves provided an opportunity to create open-air churches without construction permits. Finally, a massive cathedral was created out of the largest of the caverns.

Close to 6,000 Egyptians attend weekly services at this outdoor cathedral. It has now been decorated with raised relief carvings by European artists inspired by the story of the so-called “Monastery of St. Samaan.” Christians from all over Egypt come to visit the garbage village and to gasp in wonder at the beautiful churches that have been carved out of the cliff face. The cavernous cathedral has become a centre of pilgrimage for Christians from around the world. In one of the most unlikely of places the church has created something beautiful which has in many ways transformed the city.

Those who have spent a significant amount of time outside the global North are quick to see institutional religion alive, thriving, and bringing renewal and revival to the most depressed urban spaces. Garbage city’s cathedral is a testimony to the vibrancy of religion in today’s urban spaces. The same is true of our urban centres; however, for those of us who live in the global North, the impact of religious institutions remains unseen.

Historically cities have had an immense role in the propagation of religion, and religion has been a core element of the success and importance of cities. Ancient cities were typically organized around the shrine of a local god, and throughout history important religious buildings and teachings formed the lifeblood of cities. It is a conceit of our western culture that cities are solely planned communities that revolve around access to markets and transportation links, built to service major industries or services. Yet, our western urban centres are still deeply impacted by religious institutions. Like the Cathedral of Garbage City, our faith centres have influenced the fabric of our cities.

### **Unseen but Present: Three Examples of Problem Solving**

There are at least three ways in which religious institutions are problem solvers. The first is the way in which church buildings contribute to the physical environment of a city. I fear at times that we have lost the wondrous way in which a church changes up the mundane skyline of a city; they contribute greatly to the character of a city. I grew up close to a large Pentecostal Assembly that boasted a colossal light-up cross that provided a landmark for the entire city. In another neighbourhood, the exotic architecture of the local mosque provided me with my earliest envisionings of Islam. Some of the most

beautiful photographs from my hometown are those that feature portions of the local Roman Catholic basilica. No matter the excesses and pitfalls that have attended the phases of religious architecture, I think that these buildings take seriously the task of delighting the imagination and offering social comfort to those inside and outside the faith community. How much poorer and less interesting would the city be without these spaces?

A second way in which religious institutions impact our cities is by providing services to the community. The highest profile agencies of social action are often those of a public and secular nature, but the workhorses of social policy in most every country around the world are not the departments of social welfare or *ad hoc* community networks, but rather religious charities. For example, the largest providers of comfort to the urban poor and destitute in the city of Vancouver are the Salvation Army and the Union Gospel Mission. There is also a burgeoning network of refugee hospices throughout Canada which arose from the model pioneered by The Matthew House, a Christian organization in Toronto. Furthermore, it is often religious communities that provide the social spaces for the mentally handicapped within our cities. Organizations like L'Arche form global networks of care for the mentally and physically handicapped members of our society. These are merely a few of the services and initiatives provided by our religious institutions, and they are vital to the well-being of our cities.

Finally, religious institutions impact our cities as intellectual and social networking points. They serve as modern *agoras* in the network of ideas. I have spent much time in academia, which tends to think of itself as the epicentre of thought, when in fact it is largely a derivative of a more time-honoured trend among the great religious traditions of the ages. Religious institutions are where many of us are trained, socialized, and meet others to engage in debate, discussion, and friendship. They have cultivated and preserved music, craft, and visual artistry. They provide venues for other local organizations: from the conservatory of music, to political movements, to polling places. Without the church, our societies would be far more atomistic, would lack many networking opportunities and places to share our lives.

### **So What?**

If religious institutions are so vital to the well-being of our urban communities, what does this mean? Why is it important for us to identify the role of religious institutions?

First, the observation calls governments and other city stakeholders to look for creative ways in which religious institutions can help with the challenges that face cities. I am not suggesting a corporatist mode of state-society relations, which grants to the state a role in cultivating and organizing churches, but rather a

renewed discussion within a pluralist model of interest representation for religious institutions to be constructively engaged.

At a minimum, elected officials should cultivate links with faith communities and display their value through public statements and actions. This will often bring our leaders out of their own comfort zones and into contact with faith communities outside their own. It seems to me that a myriad of problems that arise among certain religious communities could be headed off merely through displays of respect for the sensibilities and feelings of all religious groups, no matter the size and apparent political significance.

But, it seems to me that in most liberal democratic societies there is already a strong sense among elected officials of the importance of local faith leaders. However, I believe there is significant room for improvement in this relationship when it comes to the civil service and academia—each of which has approached faith groups with either suspicion or apathy. Faith dialogue and involvement in both of these sectors has always seemed in a state of arrested development. In particular, there are certain communities that either lack natural connections with the establishment or have underdeveloped institutional capacities to deal with government and academe. It seems to me that the absence of these relationships is one of the most dangerous phenomena of our time.

The religious institutions of our urban centres may often be unseen, but their impact is tangible. As we look to understand and to build better cities which exist in an increasingly global world, we must continue to work to realize the impact religious communities have on our cities. Old-time mysteries occasionally bid the reader, “*cherchez la femme*.” Perhaps I’m asking us all to “*cherchez l’église*.” How much goes on among religious cloisters behind the scenes in the greatest cities of the world? How many communities are finding new life because of the activities of religious networks? I venture to guess that it is more than we know. We have taken a step forward in this call to understanding the intersection of religious institutions and the city, and I hope that it becomes the first step in a much longer journey.



Paul S. Rowe is Associate Professor of Political and International Studies at Trinity Western University, and coordinator of the Political and International Studies programmes. Dr. Rowe’s research interests are in the politics of religion in the Middle East and at the global level.

# PROBLEM SOLVING AND TROUBLE MAKING

Geoff Ryan

In 2003, Toronto experienced the horrific abduction and murder of a 10 year old girl in the west end of the city by the name of Holly Jones. It turned out that a neighbour, who apparently would sit alone pondering porn all day, had decided to act on his obsessions. He kidnapped Holly and killed her, cut her body up and threw the pieces into the waters of Lake Ontario. In a culture of shock, where the ability to shock is actually rare, this macabre crime shocked the city and the country.

One evening some weeks after the full story of what happened to Holly had emerged, I was talking about the tragedy with some friends. One remarked: "How could someone actually do something like that?" The other two nodded in agreement, suitably disturbed. We talked further and then all three headed off to watch the film *Red Dragon*, a sequel to the 1991 release, *The Silence of the Lambs*.

After they left it occurred to me that this film outing might in itself point toward an answer to that question. How could people do something like that? Well, the seeds of someone doing something like that, at least in part, were inherent in watching a film like that. Let me explain.

I think that films like *Silence of The Lambs*, *Red Dragon* and mostly anything by Quentin Tarantino fall into the realm of pornography. Pornography isn't just about sex, but can extend into other areas as well, each genre having their own film and TV presence and dedicated magazines: food porn (the plethora of cooking programs); car porn (the *Fast and Furious* film franchise); house porn (*Home & Garden* magazine, *Extreme Home Makeover*); poverty porn ("Live Aid"); Torture Porn (the *Saw* films, slasher flicks).

The core dynamics of any type of pornography are a blurring of the line between reality and fantasy, and then pushing the boundaries of the possible. It permits the person who indulges to consider the possibility of something that he or she, or



anyone else, would not ordinarily ever consider or think about. Porn introduces into one's thought life the possibility, the "what if," of a darker side of human nature. It's the proverbial camel poking its nose into the tent. And there will always be those people in society who take that "what if" a fatal step further and make it into reality.

I think that it is because ordinary, normal people patronize films such as *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs* that depraved ideas such as violent murder, psychopathic thought processes and human cannibalism start to be considered in the public consciousness as possibilities. From consideration the next step is acceptance in some form, possibly as a fantasy reality, often as a weird and parallel, sub-culture norm. Once the unthinkable has begun to be thought about enough and become accepted in some form, the next step is to make it a reality and concretize it—to enact it. Michael Briere, the quiet neighbour who killed Holly Jones, told the court at his trial that he was "consumed by desire after viewing child pornography."

After living overseas for most of the 1990s, I returned to Canada in 2000 having not watched TV for almost a decade. Turning our new TV set one evening, I caught an episode of "The Sopranos," a show enjoying huge popularity at the time. I was surprised at how much swearing there was and the extremity of it. It is not swearing in itself that disturbs me, but rather the fact that it was happening on a mainstream TV show airing in

prime-time and before my kids' bedtime. This indicated to me that a shift in societal acceptability had occurred while I was out of the country. At the risk of sounding like the middle-aged man that I am, such a thing would never have been permitted even a decade previously. But as culture evolves—or devolves—the unthinkable is thought about; then the possibility that things can be said (and done) is introduced into the cultural psyche; the possibility is entertained; and the stage is set for an acceptance of the new, expanded reality.

So what does this all have to do with the church and the city in conversation, and with the question of whether religious communities are problems solvers or problem makers?

Cities are the cradles of culture in society. Urban centres contain the critical mass of people and ideas and, therefore, the capacity to move culture. It is in cities that much of culture, high and low, is birthed, shaped and disseminated. Some dictionary definitions of culture are: "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another"; "a particular form or stage of civilization"; "the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group." All of this is to say that who we are as a nation, society and people, is driven by the cultural context. We shape it even as we are shaped by it. All of our public institutions and our private constructs are products—to greater or lesser degrees—of the culture that is incubated in our cities.

I believe that religious communities—churches, mosques, temples—bring numerous benefits to cities. One thing that they all have in common is their essentially conservative nature. Now, “conservative” is one of the many words that has changed profoundly in meaning, becoming quite devalued. It has shifted from a positive notion to an essentially negative connotation, to the point that one of our major Canadian political parties, the Conservatives, adopted oxymoronic branding in order to mitigate against the culturally negative optics of their name, and became “The Progressive Conservatives.”

At the root of the word “conservative” is the idea of “to conserve,” or “to preserve”, which is fundamentally a protective and salvific concept. People make preserves or jam, capturing the essential goodness of the fruit, keeping it from rot until a time when it can be enjoyed by all. People conserve vegetables, so that when times are tougher and fresh vegetables are scarce, there will be enough sustenance for everyone. Even the dictionary notes that in spite of today’s understanding of the word (“cautiously moderate, purposefully low; traditional”) it still contains the older truth of the conservative function of “preserving,” “limiting change,” “avoiding novelty,” and “having the power to conserve.”

So my radical thought here (as in the original meaning of “radical,” meaning a return to the root, the fundament) is that religious communities in our cities, due to their essentially con-

servative nature and as the main repositories of societal ethics, morals and values, act as preservatives to keep culture from spoiling and rotting. Religious communities are really the only ones left in society who might say to culture: “Hold on, maybe we shouldn’t be thinking about this?”; “Maybe opening up these possibilities will result in consequences that harm the common good”; “Maybe this is simply wrong.”

I believe that religious communities constitute the soul of the city and the conscience of culture. In Christian terms, we would say that faith communities act as “salt” (a preservative) and “light” (illumination). Without them society would have no brakes, and it would simply be a matter of time before we crash.



Geoff Ryan is a Research Fellow with Cardus. He is also a Major in The Salvation Army, continuing a family tradition that goes back four generations. Returning to Canada from Russia in the summer of 2000, Geoff accepted responsibility for The Salvation Army operations in Regent Park, an inner-city neighbourhood in Toronto's downtown eastside. Regent Park is home to the oldest and largest housing project in Canada. Since the opening of the Army's 614 Regent Park in the spring of 2001, this faith community has become a model for other inner city missions around the world. The 614 network presently includes over 20 active faith communities in under-resourced urban neighbourhoods in six countries.

## IN SUPPORT OF TRUE URBANISM

Bev Sandalack

Churches, mosques, and synagogues were once both the religious as well as the physical, social and cultural hearts of cities, towns and neighbourhoods. They were located in town centres, where they offered places to worship, gather and take refuge. In Muslim communities, having a mosque within walking distance of home and work assisted, five times each day, in answering the call to prayer. For Orthodox Jews, having a synagogue within walking distance allowed people to adhere to the Shabbat prohibitions against work. Religious institutions

were woven into the fabric of the city, as part of the structure and the function of day to day life.

How much things have changed! I can see in this at least three issues of note.

### **Suburbanization**

In most North American cities, the practice of land use zoning was developed to remedy some negative Victorian urban conditions, and it soon gave way to an oversimplification of land use. Through zoning, modern planning attempted to keep residential, commercial and industrial uses segregated. Although that condition isn't how one could describe any of the really good urban places—as one of segregated single uses where we all have to drive between where we live, work, shop, recreate, and worship—it has become solidly entrenched.

Most new development now occurs on the urban edges of cities (in Calgary some 90% of new development occurs in new suburbs), and takes the form of huge swaths of single family housing. At the same time, inner city neighbourhoods struggle to keep residents, and especially families, as schools, libraries, swimming pools and churches shut down due to rising operating costs and the practice of decentralization. Good urbanism requires a mix of uses including housing, shops, offices, schools and parks, and also religious institutions. Neighbourhoods with-

out any of these are poorer. There are many benefits of keeping small, and staying local.

Although many cities are now embracing efforts to re-urbanize by mixing uses and increasing density, urban process can't just turn on a dime, especially when much new infrastructure and building stock is now in place to support suburbanization. Initiatives from within the municipal structure as well as from constituents, such as religious institutions, are needed in order to change this process.

### **Big box religion**

Big box retailers figured out long ago the economies of scale of larger buildings as well as the tax benefits of locating on the urban fringe. Religious institutions have unfortunately also embraced this pattern, and growing congregations are more frequently accommodated in larger and larger buildings on the edge of the city or on cheaper industrial land, where parking can be provided.

Smaller churches or mosques used to be tethered to their neighbourhood communities. Now they belong nowhere—a warehouse building in a sea of asphalt that says little about the humanity within. Going this route often denies the members of the congregation from developing the sense of place that comes from being in a neighbourhood, and it also means that anyone

without easy access to transportation will be excluded, and no one will just be able to drop in.

Building design of these big box churches and mosques has also gone down a regrettable path. There is a clear architectural vocabulary associated with various building types that expresses their function and makes them legible. Steeples and minarets, form and massing, and the locations of windows and entries where one would expect them, help to make a building understandable. Much of this architectural expression has been lost or forgotten, in favour of anonymous details and structures. How many of us have had to rely on signage to figure out if that big box is a warehouse, a hardware store or a church? Legibility is an important quality in good city form—if a building or a place looks like what it is, the familiarity gives city residents a sense of competence through being able to understand their environment. It is a friendlier approach to building in a place.

### **Loss of public space**

The final point relates to the spaces around religious buildings. A public space in the form of a plaza or garden was often part of the assemblage of a religious building, reinforcing its broader social role, and often making a special place in the neighbourhood where people could gather even when the building was not in use for a religious service. These streets, parks, squares and plazas of a city are collectively known as

the public realm. These are spaces where all citizens can be *by right*. They are physical as well as metaphysical spaces, and have actual and symbolic value. A massive parking lot as the religious open space just doesn't cut it.

The public realm is perhaps where relationships between humans can be most potent in the city, and where religious institutions can show a civic generosity. However, if we continue to build our institutions outside the fabric of the city, and without proper public spaces, we are eliminating that potential and we are also in danger of rendering churches, mosques and synagogues irrelevant to the greater population. Out of sight, out of mind!

### **Where to next?**

Instead of being part of the urban fabric, where they can contribute to the structure and function of the city and to the social life of the community, religious institutions have become isolated outposts where their influence is highly constrained. This article isn't ignoring the commendable outreach programs of many institutions, but pointing to the strange absurdity of how city planning processes and economies of scale have conspired to remove too many institutions, religious and otherwise, from the society that they serve.

Religious institutions, by succumbing to the big box trends, are now complicit in many negative urban processes, as huge parking lots and remote locations make them unreachable except by car, and as largely nondescript architecture renders them anonymous and illegible in the suburban townscape.

Physical comprehension of the city takes place through the urban structure and patterns, through the architecture of its various parts, and through the inhabitation of the public realm of squares, plazas, parks and public buildings. The challenge is to build a city and a society in which there is more cultural meaning, civic engagement and social connectivity. The role of the church, the synagogue and the mosque goes beyond the needs of the congregation. By remaining physically within the community, rather than migrating to the edge, the church has the potential to contribute to society in many more ways. Wouldn't a richer, more legible urban environment just make more sense, and also make us feel better about our cities?



After practicing landscape architecture and planning with private sector firms in Alberta and Manitoba, Bev Sandalack concentrated on urban design. She teaches urban design and physical planning studios and theory courses, and her research interests are in urban design theory and methods, urban morphology, the development of local and regional identity, and health and the built environment. Bev also has an ongoing research interest in neighbourhood form and small towns, particularly Canadian prairie towns. The Urban Lab at the Faculty of Environmental Design is the physical setting for her research.

# BEING PRESENT IN THE CITY

Dani Shaw

The August 2003 power blackout that hit Ontario and the Northeastern United States is indelibly inscribed in my mind. I was living in Ottawa, having moved to the city just 6 weeks earlier. This was my second attempt at moving to Ottawa, the first lasting just 10 months from October 1997 to July 1998. Ottawa had changed considerably over those 5 years. It seemed bigger, rougher, more seedy and more violent. It was also more ethnically diverse than I remembered. Just a week earlier, a promising young Ph.D. student was brutally raped and murdered in one of Ottawa's idyllic green spaces. A number of

darkly dressed, tattooed and heavily pierced youth had set up camp under the Terry Fox bridge in downtown Ottawa, making it difficult for tourists and Ottawa residents to walk to the Rideau Centre or the Byward Market—two Ottawa landmarks—from Parliament Hill without negotiating their way through the menacing crowd. And in our little neighbourhood, which consisted of geared-to-income, co-operative and privately owned housing, French and English seemed to be second and even third languages, with the majority of residents speaking Lebanese or Arabic or any number of African languages.

I was the last person to leave the office on the day of the blackout. When the power first went out, I assumed it was a momentary glitch. Twenty minutes later, I wandered down to the ground floor and sat on a bench on Sparks Street, basking in the mid-August late-afternoon sun. I opened a book and attempted to read, but spent most of my time watching the passers-by. A scruffy looking man in his mid-50s walked past me, staring at me intently as he went by. His gaze was so intense it was almost unsettling. Moments later, I heard a series of gunshots. My first instinct was to conclude it was an angry protest. Summer in the nation's capital is *the* time for protests. Marches on Parliament Hill are a regular event in the summer, even though the politicians are not there to hear the groups' complaints. Within seconds of hearing the gunfire, I sat calmly and patiently as I watched people screaming and running up Elgin Street onto Sparks Street looking for cover. I was surprised by

my own reaction. I could get up and run for cover too, but I was already seated on a bench several metres away from the action, and getting up to run down the middle of Sparks Street would only make me stand out (literally) from the crowd. I could sit still and take my chances that the gunmen weren't coming my way.

As I sat there, surprisingly calm, the scruffy man approached me once again. He was shaking and pale. He told me one of the gunmen pointed the gun right at him and fired. The man was sure he would die, given the proximity of the gunman and the trajectory of the bullet. Having lived to tell the tale, the man was in shock. He needed someone to talk to—someone who was not also in shock or hiding in a doorway or under a restaurant patio table and looking for cover.

At the time, I was a uniform-wearing member of The Salvation Army and, as such, I stuck out in the crowd. The man shared his shock and disbelief with me, and eventually told me he was a resident at The Salvation Army shelter in town. He told me his story—one of sorrow and addiction and broken family ties. He told me the challenges of living in the local shelter. And he shared with me some of his deepest regrets.

There are many who doubt the value of the Church in contemporary society. Some maintain the Church operates according to an antiquated set of social norms that subjugate women and ethnic minorities and generally stand in the way

of progress. Others argue that the Church perpetuates human suffering and misery by spiritualizing them, turning them into the inescapable will of God that is to be endured with gladness.

Despite these criticisms, it is at times like the 2003 blackout that the Church becomes most relevant. While the politicians were temporarily deaf to the grievances of protesters and the police struggled to bring order to a city in chaos, the Church was present in a single individual who was willing to listen to a street person whose life had just flashed before his eyes. It is in these unanticipated moments that a simple presence in the heart of the city can make a meaningful difference.

Churches that are present in the city and attentive to the needs around them serve as ports in the storms of contemporary urban life, providing places of shelter and rest for those tossed about by the winds of constant progress and change, competition and conflict, isolation and anonymity.

Congregations that have been present for generations provide not only an understanding of a community's past and the way in which it has changed over time, but also a vision for the future, one that continues to meet the needs of that community as it continues to change.

Built in 1828 in order to provide gainful employment for underemployed construction workers, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Ottawa continues to meet community needs through refugee sponsorship, supporting local missions and shelters with



volunteer hours and donations, and Open Door days that allow passers by to drop in for a moment of quiet contemplation. Founded in the 1850s, St. Joseph's Parish now responds to the needs of the community by sponsoring English conversation groups, planning social gatherings and providing donated furniture and other household items for newcomers to Canada. St. Joe's Women's Centre is a drop-in centre for homeless women and children that offers supports ranging from things as simple as afternoon movies and children's crafts, to workshops on parenting, budgeting and job search skills. The Salvation Army Booth Centre, which recently celebrated its 100th anniversary, provides emergency, transitional and longer-term supportive housing to vulnerable men in the city's downtown core.

It is this presence—this abiding and adaptive presence—that affirms the value and the relevance of religious communities in the cities of today.



Dani Shaw is a lawyer, a writer and a former political advisor to Stephen Harper and two successive federal Health Ministers. An urbanite at heart, Dani currently lives in Ottawa's car-dependent suburban east end where there are very few sidewalks and streetlights but plenty of outdoor spaces such as parks, sports fields and bicycle paths.

Dani has previously written about the interplay between faith and politics and the place of religion and the Church in contemporary society.

# THE MISSIONAL CHURCH AS PROBLEM SOLVER

Tim Sheridan

The issues facing our cities are diverse and complex. The need for collaboration among diverse stakeholders is widely recognized. While the contribution of “missional churches” is limited in scope, the role of these churches can be significant. I believe such churches make key “problem solving” contributions to their urban neighbourhoods, particularly in the now widely recognized virtue of bridging social capital.

The benefits of social capital for cities and urban neighbourhoods are manifold. Citing Robert Putnam’s work, Mark Smith mentions a few of the concrete benefits: child development is powerfully improved by strong social capital; public spaces are cleaner; people are friendlier; streets are safer; institutions and businesses flourish; and individual health and well-being improve. For urban growth and development to be sustainable, the strength of social capital should be of vital concern and a central element in the discussion. Let us consider a couple of the key components in the development of strong social capital in urban communities.

Putnam’s work, and that of others like Francis Fukuyama, has demonstrated that two of the key components for building strong social capital are trust and interpersonal connectedness. One challenge facing our urban centres is the incredible array of diversity, and the potential threats and challenges this diversity brings to sustaining trust and interpersonal connections. Nick Pearce cites recent evidence “marshaled by theorists of social capital, particularly in the USA, that increased ethnic diversity is associated with lower levels of trust and civic-ness between citizens.” Ethnic diversity is only one variable of diversity. Our urban centres are noted for their rich diversity along many lines: social, economic, worldview, religious, education, employment, and housing.

Pearce argues that trust is not necessarily at odds with increased diversity, and that trust is not achievable through political action or urban planning policy: “Interpersonal trust and civic belonging are themselves often forged through social struggles, and the creation and maintenance of institutions and practices that generate and sustain other-regarding virtues.” What types of institutions exist in our cities that “generate and sustain other-regarding virtues?” In other words, what institutions do we find in our cities that have the potential to develop and sustain what social capital theorists refer to as “bridging” social capital: the kind of social capital that accommodates diversity and is able to encompass people of many different social groups we find in our urban centres?

In a recent study focused on Canadian cities, Aizlewood and Pendakur demonstrate that ethno-cultural diversity is not as major a factor for the accumulation of social capital in Canada as it is in the United States. Rather, the dominating factor that affects social capital in Canada is community size:

In three of the five models—participation, interpersonal trust and seeing friends—the larger the city of residence, the less likely people are to participate, trust, and socialize. Generalized trust in cities is reduced because familiarity is a more selective, network-based phenomenon.

So the problem seems to be in the very process of urbanization—the larger the city, the greater the negative effect on

social capital. What is striking is the remedy suggested by this study—higher levels of education and income. Simply stated, the higher the levels of education and income among urban dwellers, the greater the social capital.

Are these the only “levers for affecting social capital” in our Canadian cities? What about the institution of the church—particularly, emerging missional churches? Missional churches are churches that recognize the power of their associational life to generate and sustain the “other-regarding” virtues so vital to the strength of bridging social capital. Missional churches will often refer to themselves as “alternative communities” and by this they have in mind the power of communal life together that is marked by its diversity and embrace of the “other.” This is striking. Historically, churches have likely been noted, instead, for their “bonding social capital”: the strong social cohesion that often functioned to exclude those who were “other” or different. Increasingly, missional churches are reflecting the diversity of their urban neighbourhoods and demonstrating a capacity for fostering connection and trust among a diversity of people.

This capacity has been noted by urban pastor and missiologist Mark Gornik in his celebrated *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*. Gornik argues that we need a structural change in our whole way of thinking about sustainable cities and the role of the church. Often advocates of a civil society look to the role of churches as “mediating institutions”

which, along with other local community groups of this category, provide a buffer between the market economy and the government. Churches are much more than this, argues Gornik. Missional churches are “living communities of truth, grace, and reconciliation” where Christian identity cuts across every other dividing line found in our urban neighbourhoods.

These communities have the resources and capacity not only to engender “other-regarding virtues,” but to be places where bridging social capital is nurtured and experienced in the urban neighbourhoods of our cities. At the heart of this dynamic is the ability of these missional church communities to locate identity and the personal contribution of diverse community members in categories that supercede economic, educational, or ethnic stratification and diversity. Simply put, they live together in “reconciled diversity” that helps them form “alternative communities” where the “other” is embraced and encouraged to contribute. For these churches, their ability to embrace the “other” and live in community amidst a rich ethnic, social, economic, educational, and employment diversity is central to their mission and a powerful witness to their message.

Sustainable cities are a common concern for both the urban planner and the missional church. This is a concern rooted in different motivations and shaped by divergent traditions. Yet the emergence of missional churches can be seen as another bright spot on the urban landscape, a new stakeholder com-

mitted to the vitality and sustainability of our urban centres or a major player in sustainable urban growth and development.

Missional churches are institutions and faith-communities committed to our increasingly urban world and its realities. They possess the resources and potential to make vital contributions in bridging social capital. They are impelled by a vision that looks to an urban future for all humanity—an urban future noted for its rich diversity, wild beauty, and life-giving vitality.



Tim Sheridan is originally from sunny southern California. With his wife and four children, he has been living in East Hamilton for the past five years. He began his time in Hamilton as the director of outreach at First Hamilton Christian Reformed Church, one of the oldest Christian Reformed churches in Ontario. During the past few years, he has been leading a group of people from First Hamilton who live in East Hamilton and who have together birthed a new church community, New Hope Church.

Tim lectures part-time at Redeemer University College in Ancaster and is currently working on a doctoral degree where he is exploring aspects of both the missional and emergent church movements today. He also enjoys board games and mountain biking in our beautiful city of Hamilton.

# CONVICTION AND MERCY

David Smith

Some days I fear for the future of the Christian church in Toronto. I know I shouldn't say that because I'm supposed to be a Christian leader and it sounds like I lack faith. Maybe it's more accurate to say that my mind projects the obvious decline in the number of church buildings into the future. A falling line has to hit zero sometime.

Isn't it a tremendous irony that study after study shows that the vast majority of us believe in God, yet more and more downtown church buildings are being converted into condos and rental space? You'd think if people were that hungry for

God, there would be no better place to get your fill than in church.

I guess there's lots of good demographic reasons why we would be closing so many churches—age, culture, immigration patterns. And pointing fingers at the clergy and church leaders for their lack of inspiration and example is frankly a tired saw. But since when did the Christian church become a function of demographics anyway? And when did it become so vulnerable to the misdemeanours and even crimes of those who lead it? The church is not based on age, culture or human weakness. It's based on a timeless personal relationship with Jesus Christ, regardless of how fallen any one of us might be.

Jesus speaks all languages. He lives everywhere. He knows each of us better than we know ourselves and He has seen it all.

Fortunately, not all churches are disappearing. In fact, new churches are springing up all the time. You can't see them, though, because many, even most, meet in basements, community centres and in members' homes. The new churches have lots of things going for them. They're vibrant. Many operate on a shoe-string. Their pastors work for next to nothing, often on their own time. The members readily commit their time and money. They have a keen sense of call. They are excited and joyous when they worship.

The new and growing churches have one main thing in common: they preach the Bible the way it is. They don't start with a social issue and then find scripture verses to fit their theories. They start with the scripture passage and then apply it to the issue. They tell people what the Bible says. Then they help people to make their own choices about all the infinite exceptions and shades of gray.

I believe that preachers who don't plainly explain to people what is and what isn't in the Bible contribute to spiritual confusion, confusion that undermines the import of the Christian message and which hampers church growth.

The Bible is full of all sorts of black-and-white statements. These statements aren't open for revision. However, they are totally open to interpretation guided by the law of love. Let's take the Fourth Commandment for example. It says, "...the seventh day [of the week] is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work..." (Exodus 20:10). This statement could not be clearer. Preachers need to state it clearly too. Then we can get into a discussion about interpretations: whether the seventh day is Saturday or Sunday, whether it begins at midnight or dawn, whether making breakfast is work or necessity, whether hobbies, like carpentry or knitting, that also have a useful purpose are work, whether certain forms of surgery should be performed, whether I can work the weekend shift and still be a good Christian. That many of us have to work on Sunday

does not change Scripture's intent that each of us needs at least one good day off a week in which to regroup and reflect on God's blessings.

Let's take another example: divorce. Jesus makes this hard statement in the Gospel of Matthew (19:9): "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." As a remarried divorced person, I take this one personally! I might prefer to skip over this "obviously outmoded" passage of Scripture, the way I might like to skip over the Ten Commandments as well.

What I'm saying is that people need to hear what the Bible is clear about. The Bible is against people having to work seven days a week. The Bible is against divorce. The Bible is against taking human life and all sorts of other things. People need to know what the Bible is for and what it's against. Otherwise, how can they make up their own minds?

No Christian leader would criticize a parent who has to work on Sunday to put food on the table. We all know how difficult marriage and relationships are, how relationships can change, how they can be just plain mistakes. And we know we're going to continue to send our service-men and -women into combat around the world, and that we will pray for them and support and honour them in every way we know how.

So, would I say that religious communities in the city are problem-solvers or problem-makers? I guess I can only speak with respect to the Christian church. Christian churches should be problem-makers to the extent that it is their duty to confront society with what is definitive in the Bible. The churches should also be problem-solvers in that they help people to decide for themselves how to apply Christian conviction with kindness, understanding and mercy.



David Smith became the CEO & ED of The Scott Mission in 2004. Before that, he was Executive Director of Evangel Hall in Toronto. Before that, he was a not-so-big-time management consultant with a very big-time consulting firm. And before that, he was a monk in the Franciscan order. It has taken him all this time to figure out that God really IS everywhere.

## CANADIAN CHURCHES AND SUSTAINABLE URBAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Glenn Smith

In spite of the vast and excellent literature on Canadian urban issues that exists today, unfortunately very little has been written to document the experience of Christian ecclesial reflection and practice in our census metropolitan areas. Even less has been written on holistic sustainable community development. Over the past decade very few significant articles have appeared. David Ley, professor of urban geography at the

University of British Columbia, has written three fine, accessible pieces about faith in the Canadian city. There are two reasons to explain this. First and foremost, people doing urban ministry in Canada (and across the globe, for that matter) rarely take time to reflect in writing on their actions and learnings. We all are impoverished because of this. Second, American perspectives influence far too many notions about community development in Canada. A literature review illustrates that! Christians continue to identify community development (solely) with inner city poverty issues, neglecting the broader issues of Canadian urbanization and urbanism. For that reason alone, one must insist on describing metropolitan orientations by using Canadian data.

I live in one of those “places”; one which is as contextually specific as any of the other nine Census Metropolitan Areas in Canada—the city of Montréal. *Place is space with historical meanings, different identities, varied societal preoccupations.* For example, I live in the city where philosophical postmodernism was first coined and studied as a social and philosophical expression. Montréal is a different place than the one that most people are talking about when discussing this theme. The unending story we find ourselves in always needs to be woven into the fabric of place a little differently. To illustrate this, I will footnote Montréal particularities throughout the paper.

But beyond definitions and the demographic function of cities known as “urban growth,” one may ask, “*What is happening to Canadian urban society?*” What were the conditions, inherited from the past, which have been transformed in these last forty years that help us understand its present state? This is a fundamental question we need to explore, if we are to understand the cultural context in which we pursue community development. But our concern points in a further direction with a second question, “*How will the church reflect and pursue relevant community development in the years ahead?*” In attempting to answer that question, congregations will be able to demonstrate whether she is a problem solver or a problem maker in the Canadian metropolitan landscape.

To answer these two questions, an attentive practitioner can use an ethnographic analysis of the culture so as to understand how social structures and human behaviour interact and influence a city. A transformational method is an excellent tool for the Christian practitioner who desires to study the following: the knowledge and practices of people; the manner they use their freedom to dominate, to transform, to organize, to arrange, and to master space for their personal pursuit so as to live, to protect themselves, to survive, to produce, and to reproduce. To do this one must master dominant tendencies so as to grasp where we have come from and where we are going as a society and what the mission of God in this culture will look like. Urban practi



tioners need to be able to identify local worldviews in order to understand the spirituality in their particular context.

The central tenet of my argument affirms that cities evolve within the worldview of the societies within which they are located. In spatial and architectural forms they are manifestations of deeply rooted cultural processes that encompass economic, social and religious/worldview elements as well.

### **What then is sustainable urban development?**

Community development fundamentally aims to improve living conditions and revitalize neighbourhoods. Community organization is the various networking strategies employed to accomplish the specific mission of the agencies committed to the vision for the neighbourhood as it is conceived.

In the United States, Ferguson and Dickens point out that issues around public housing are at the core of community development corporations in that country. But as Richard Morin and Jill Hanley point out in their comparison of community development in four North American cities, the national context really matters in how community development is articulated.

I see community development as part of an organization field that has a preferential option for the local community. It is a multi-faceted initiative that mobilizes a vast number of partners, acting out of an increasing awareness of their deepest

values and assumptions, to confront the forces that destroy their individual lives, families and communities—all to build social capital to improve the quality of life and contribute to the holistic transformation of the community. As poverty in all its facets is challenged and persons are freed to develop their identity and vocations in life, then social capital is released in fresh ways. The organizational field as a system encompasses the principal levels of involvement—grassroots participants who generally are volunteers, local agencies that deliver services, organizations and structures on the municipal or national levels that directly support these agencies, and then provincial and federal entities that intervene on a punctual basis depending on the province and the area of competency. However, community development can only take root as issues of power, capacity, and especially trust among the partners, are brought to bear on the major assets that improve the quality of life and contribute to the transformation of the community.

We can conclude by saying that community development is journeying in community to express aspirations, discover assets, confront limitations and generate solutions for peace and well-being in homes and neighbourhoods.

### **Why the Church pursues sustainable community development**

But for what purpose does the urban ministry practitioner

pursue community development? Why listen to both the present context and Christian tradition, including our study of the Scriptures, Church history and theology? Increasingly we hear the use of the word *transformation* as a term that encompasses all that the Church does as followers of Jesus in God's mission in the city. But what does this mean? What does it entail?

I would suggest that a transformed place is that kind of community that pursues fundamental changes, a stable future and the sustaining and enhancing of all of life rooted in a vision bigger than mere urban politics.

If we accept that the Scriptures call the people of God to take all dimensions of life seriously, then we can take the necessary steps to a more holistic notion of transformation. A framework that points to the best of a human future for our city-regions can then be rooted in the reign of God.

In Jewish writings and tradition it is the principle of *shalom*. It represents harmony, complementarity, and establishment of relationships at the interpersonal, ethnic, and even global levels. Psalm 85:11 announces a surprising event: "*Justice and peace will embrace.*" However, a good number of our contemporaries see no problem with peace without justice. People looking for this type of peace muzzle the victims of injustice because they trouble the social order of the city. But the Bible shows that there cannot be peace without justice. We also have a tendency to describe peace as the absence of conflict. But *shalom* is so

much more. In its fullness it evokes harmony, prosperity, and welfare.

The term goes to the very heart of God's picture of what he has created and desires for Creation is *shalom*. The word occurs 236 times in the Old Testament. It refers to a state of fulfilment resulting from God's presence and covenantal relationship with His people. It encompasses concepts of completeness, harmony and well-being.

The Old Testament record indicates three other important aspects of *shalom*. First of all, we see from the semantic field of the word that it implies an absence of strife but with the rich implications of a state of rest. Implicit in this first use of the term is the notion of unimpaired relationships with others and true enjoyment in all one does.

Second, the term is a synonym for all we would imply by the general state of well-being of a person, a community and nature. The ideas of completeness, wholeness, prosperity, harmony and fulfilment summarize this best. The ground meaning of the word is well-being and indeed with a manifest emphasis on the material side. Leviticus 26:1-12 illustrates this.

Finally, *shalom* includes an eschatological aspect. (Isaiah 9:5-6.) The Messiah, the Prince of Peace (*sar shalom*), will bring fulfilment and righteousness to the earth.

In the New Testament, the image persists but the term changes. The reign of God is the royal redemptive plan of the Creator, initially given as a task marked out for Israel, then re-inaugurated in the life and mission of Jesus. This reign is to destroy his enemies, to liberate humanity from the sin of Adam and ultimately establish his authority in all spheres of the cosmos: our individual lives, the Church, society, the spirit world and ecological order. Yet, we live in the presence of the future. The Church is “between the times,” as it were: between the inauguration and the consummation of the Kingdom. It is the only message worth incarnating for the whole city!

The action-reflection-action mediation of the transformational model will take on many facets. Partnerships are indispensable to the process. Some will be rooted in geographical boundaries, others in the interpersonal social bonds that people create around issues and concerns. Projects will emerge through the partnerships so that people can solve problems on their own. Advocacy is inevitable in our cities by their very nature. These efforts will be to get various levels of the public and private sectors to assume their obligations (under the law) to improve the living conditions and revitalize neighbourhoods. For example, in my city, better than 50% of this year’s cohort will not complete high-school five years from now. It is obvious that advocating for just educational systems to promote school success is a priority. A cycle of reflection on actions will establish itself. If you get people to think about issues that concern them they

will do more social analysis and seek a deeper understanding together as to the root causes of their problems. Acting together, developing better projects and pursuing advocacy thrusts people into deeper reflection and actions.

Good community development will emerge as the participants take this very seriously and then pursue the improvement of life and the revitalization of the neighbourhood.



Dr. Glenn Smith is married to Sandra (1976) and together they have three daughters, Jenna, Julia and Christa. He has been the Executive Director of Christian Direction in Montreal since 1983. He is a professor of urban theology and missiology at the Institut de théologie pour la francophonie and at the Université chrétienne du Nord d’Haïti. He is a sessional lecturer at McGill University. He is also a professor at Bakke Graduate University.

He is the author of numerous books and articles on urban mission. His forthcoming book is entitled *City Air Makes You Free: Transforming the city through a fresh, biblical hermeneutic*.

## SAVVY IN THE CITY

Faye Sonier

To determine if religious communities are ‘problem solvers’ or ‘problem makers’, we need to identify problems that urban centres face. General consensus has been reached that poverty, high crime rates, inadequate low-cost housing, pollution and a deficiency of facilities and programs for care of the elderly, ill and abused are among those problems.

Religious communities and their members have historically responded to these needs and continue to do so. Many of today’s congregations are not sitting idly by—they’re acting and reacting, doing the difficult work of facing people’s trials and tribulations with them. As we do so, we invest in lives and,

in turn, in neighbourhoods and cities. This is work that is often trying, challenging and low-paying.

In Canada’s early days many a community, town and city grew outward from the centre of church, hospital and school—all three frequently founded by the same religious community. These institutions served the spiritual, emotional, educational and physical needs of the neighbourhoods that grew up around them.

Does this trend continue? Absolutely.

Academic research and statistics compiled over the last decade demonstrate that Canadians who regularly attend religious services provide the bulk of all money and time donated to charities. In Canada, most of those who self-identify as religious are from Christian communities. In 2001, of the 84% of Canadians identified as religious, 76% self-identified as Christian.

Canadians donated 8.9 billion dollars to charitable causes and worked two billion volunteer hours, according to a 2004 Statistics Canada survey. StatsCan concluded in 2004, as it did in 1997 and 2000, that the large majority of donations and volunteer hours came from a small percentage of the population. One of the key distinguishing characteristics of that group is regular religious service attendance.

Specifically, 19% of Canadians who attended religious services weekly provided 74% of all donations to religious charities—pretty close to the 80/20 rule we hear about—and 22% of all donations to non-religious organizations. Similarly, weekly church attendees provided 86% of all hours volunteered to religious organizations and 24% of all hours volunteered to non-religious organizations.

Clearly, not all of the contributions were made for the betterment of urban centres, however, many do either directly or indirectly. One needs only to think of the contributions of The Salvation Army, Youth Unlimited, Christian Horizons, A Rocha and a variety of street missions to understand that some problems are being addressed by religious communities—the hungry are being fed, the disabled are finding care, the lonely are finding companionship and green spaces are being protected.

The impact this has on the general societal health of urban centres is incalculable. Contributions from religious communities are helping restore people and, as research has also shown, the religious are often far more effective at doing so than government-run programs or institutions.

There is a point when fledgling groups of faith-inspired volunteers or modest charities become larger and more complex. They are earnestly seeking to be problem solvers, and, having had success at doing so, they consider seeking assistance from government as they become aware of fiscal advantages, zoning

exemptions or municipal programs which could benefit their ministry.

This evokes the question, “How can spiritual communities in urban centres better communicate with their municipal representatives—and bureaucrats—in order to convey the incredibly beneficial role they exercise?” What is required so that bureaucrats, city planners and developers take us into account and seek our input when they develop policies?

In short, how can we be savvier and even better “problem solvers,” bringing our experience to impact our centres of influence, be they a neighbourhood, a district or an entire city?

First, there is a need to recognize that people of faith do in fact have a place at the table. Our voice is valid and as equally important as other’s. Some argue that for members of a ‘secular,’ pluralistic and multicultural society to effectively co-exist and flourish, expressions of religious belief need to be pushed into private spaces.

That’s untrue. A society can only be truly liberal, democratic and pluralistic if space is available for a variety of expressions of opinion, belief and cultural tradition. It’s not always easy—accommodations and compromises need to be made—but society is consistently richer when it happens.

Second, as religious communities, we should find confidence in our rich history of service to others and tell our story. True, not all endeavours undertaken in the name of faith have been without error. However, we have and do offer something unique and valuable and that has been documented many times over.

Third, we need to be savvy, sophisticated (some might say) and speak the language of the people we're engaging with. Do the research. Communicate clearly and persuasively. Present a plan, the benefits we bring to it and the increased role we can play as "problem solvers". From time to time we may even need to hire professionals to assist us.

Finally, reflect on the political climate and make a long term commitment. This means caring for the issue, our neighbours, and the decision-makers. They're human too, and often elected leaders share that they only hear from Christians when we disapprove of something. The relationships built with these men and women will often determine the outcome of our efforts.

Religious communities produce philosophers, writers and political theorists. We also produce people who have a heart to work at the ground level. We need to integrate the two.

If we're going to get down and dirty, let's be savvy about it.



Faye Sonier is Legal Counsel with the Evangelical Fellowship Canada. Faye practices primarily constitutional law, working on matters relating to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and human rights legislation, practicing in both official languages.

Prior to joining the EFC, Faye articulated in the Corporate/Charity law section of an Ottawa firm. She has also worked at the Senate of Canada and in a public policy firm. Faye graduated from the University of Ottawa's French Common Law program in 2007. In 2006, Faye completed the Advanced Negotiation Program at Harvard Law School.

Faye and her husband live in Ottawa, Ontario.

# AN URBAN VILLAGE VANGUARD?

Gideon Strauss

The urban psychologist Frank Mills, reflecting on Proverbs 29:18 (“*Where there is no vision, the people perish*”) and Joel 2:28 (“*Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions*”) asked three provocative questions:

1. Do the people of our poorer urban neighbourhoods lack shared neighbourhood vision because their circumstances rob them of the capacity of vision, or have urban social agencies and urban planners bought into this myth, perhaps unconsciously, to justify their agenda?

2. What would happen if urban planners and urban social agencies came together to assist in the creation of shared neighbourhood vision and then allowed it to form future direction, both for solving urban issues and creating sustainable urban neighbourhoods?
3. Lastly, given that these passages are from the Bible, what is the role of faith communities in creating a vision for urban sustainability? How do we motivate faith communities to assist in the creation of such a vision in their neighbourhoods?

I would argue that the primary contribution churches can make to a renewed vision in and for city neighbourhoods is by being themselves. Let the church be the church—and let the reality of church life find expression in the buildings the church inhabits.

A church is a community of faith professing in the public realm that Jesus is Lord. This ancient and controversial assertion of the Christian church summarizes a belief that God created the cosmos and is sovereign over it; that God became incarnate in the man Jesus to address the problem of evil in his life, death, and resurrection; and that Jesus has the power for the renewal of all creation—for the time being in a limited sense, but in the long run in a comprehensive sense. Churches express this belief in public by prayer, by proclamation of the teachings of the Bible, by the sacramental celebration of the mysteries of

God's redemptive acts, and by the formation of the character of its members in and through the life of the community of faith. Churches have also from their earliest history provided care for the poor and needy.

The life of the church has a distinctive rhythm. In some church communities that rhythm is daily, in the celebration of the eucharist and prayers at designated hours. In most church communities that rhythm is weekly, centered on the Sunday services of worship. In many church communities that rhythm is also yearly, following liturgical contours anchored in Christmas and Easter.

Throughout the past twenty centuries, the Christian church has expressed its public mission in the buildings it has used and built. Its spaces for prayer, teaching, sacramental celebration and its times of worship and formation express the faith, hope and love that flows from its central profession of the Lordship of Christ. It communicates that faith, hope and love to its neighbours through the buildings themselves—be it the gothic spire signifying the transcendence of God, the monastic hospital offering shelter and respite to pilgrims, the Quaker meeting house signifying the presence of God, or any of the many other built expressions given to the life of the church. We build as we believe; our basic beliefs are built into the very fabric of our cities, towns, homesteads, and certainly churches.

By being what it is and giving expression to that life in its buildings, the church contributes to the vision of a community. Medieval cathedrals and New England meetinghouses alike offered a built centre to the lives of their communities, by their very centrality celebrating the meaningfulness of human society in the creation and under the restorative care of God. Benedictine monasteries and inner city storefront churches signify the presence and care of God in troubled communities.

In most old city neighbourhoods churches can be good neighbours by reinhabiting existing church buildings, or by building new buildings that respond in a civil way to the surrounding buildings—mimicking rooflines, picking up colours and finding further ways of not being architecturally rude.

The urban village church should see as part of its architectural vocation the repair of the urban fabric by means of the repair or construction of its own buildings, in such a way that the neighbourhood is aesthetically and socially knitted together rather than torn apart. The architecture of the church should serve its neighbourhood. And the ways in which it does so aesthetically are closely connected with the ways in which it does so socially.

I have been surprised by how unfriendly church buildings can be, even on some of the better city streets in North America. I recall walking past the windowless façade of a church on a lively street in The Beach neighbourhood of Toronto and think-



ing that it was the worst stretch of sidewalk on an otherwise fine street. Although it was an older building, the lack of doorways, windows, or articulation of any kind in the long wall, and the absence of flowerboxes or trellised plants, reminded me of the worst kind of brutalist architecture – the dead expanses around concrete block buildings, so common in institutional buildings built from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Most city churches, however, already enliven the streetscape with flowers and trees—a simple start in the church contributing to the cultivation of urban village in old cities. From such a good start, relentless incremental improvements to church buildings and gardens can consistently raise the quality of life in their neighbourhoods.

I once heard John Stackhouse of Regent College in Vancouver, B.C. speak in a public lecture of cultural renewal as “slow, hard, subtle work.” This is certainly the case with urban revitalization. City churches in their own life as communities of faith and in their neighbourly efforts to help cultivate urban villages are faced with perplexing practical problems and exhausting emotional demands.

While it helps to focus on doing simple things now—planting the petunias—it is important to recognize that simple does not mean easy. The dream of the urban village church, joining with its neighbours in the re-inhabitation and revitalization of

an old city neighbourhood, requires more than good will and ingenuity. It requires faith, hope, and love.

In *How to Turn a Place Around*, Kathleen Madden writes that in urban revitalization efforts, “all too often, lack of money is used as an excuse for doing nothing,” but that “when money is an issue, this is generally an indication that the wrong concept is at work, not because the plans are too expensive, but because the public doesn’t feel like the place belongs to them.”

In my conversations with church folk about the possibility of new faith communities re-inhabiting abandoned or neglected city church buildings, the difficulties mentioned focus on the safety of children and the lack of money. Restoring and retrofitting a dilapidated old church building for contemporary use is without a doubt costly; heating and cooling it is far more costly than would be the case for a new building. The architectural flourishes and neighbourly amenities suggested in this article come with a cost. But I think the church can learn from people like Ms. Madden. Based on the experience of the Project for Public Spaces, Ms. Madden suggests that:

- small-scale, inexpensive improvements can be more effective at drawing people into spaces than major big-bucks projects;
- developing the ability to effectively manage a space is more critical to success than a large financial investment;

- if the community is a partner in the endeavour, people will come forward and naturally draw in others; and
- when the community's vision is driving the project, money follows.

The vision of the urban village church, when embedded in the grand vision of the glory of God and the love of neighbour taught in the Christian faith, is worthy of the financial resources of the people of God. When urban village church advocates develop the necessary and demonstrable skills in management, and when churches in old city neighbourhoods recognize the importance of managing their buildings for the aesthetic delight and social comfort of their own faith communities *and* their neighbours, then the immensely affluent churches of North America should take up support of the vision of a network of churches forming the vanguard of an urban village movement, to give new life, socially and aesthetically, to the old industrial cities of North America.



Gideon Strauss is President of the Center for Public Justice (D.C.) and Editor of *Comment*, the opinion journal of *Cardus*. Gideon is a native of South Africa, where he received his Ph.D. in the ethics of public policy in 1995. He was an interpreter for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission under Archbishop emeritus

Desmond Tutu, and during the 1980s, he served just more than 3 years of a 6-year community service assignment as a conscientious objector against serving in the South African army under apartheid.

# MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE

Heikki Walden

An examination of photographs of downtown Toronto up until the mid-1960s reveals the tallest buildings were church spires and classic buildings such as the Royal York Hotel. The church spires represented the heritage of faith, and buildings such as the Royal York represented the cultural heritage of Britain. Then, beginning in the mid-1960s, the photos begin to show a remarkable transformation of the architectural landscape which could almost be described as a scene from a science-fiction movie. In particular, the photos of downtown Toronto in this period are reminiscent of the “Dawn of Man” scene in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where the

uncomprehending primates wake up one morning to discover a troubling and mysterious black obelisk has appeared in front of their cave.

In Toronto around 1965 a black obelisk rose straight up into the sky in the form of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s modernist masterpiece, the TD Centre. This was a stark, angular presence that was the first of many towers to begin blotting out the church spires and the meaningful buildings of the British Empire from Toronto’s skyline. This tower as a symbol of the modern world was meant to inspire a sense of reverence and awe at the power of the builders, as well as the building’s occupants, and to communicate a sense of mystery about what types of activities actually happened inside that dark tower. Toronto’s modernist commitment to capitalism, banking and finance had moved into the neighbourhood in the mid-1960s and proclaimed itself. The old symbols of faith and empire which had provided so much meaning were being replaced with a disruptive new metaphor—the capitalist tower that was clearly and unmistakably not related to what came before it in terms of architecture or culture.

It has been said that we worship what the tallest buildings in our cities represent. In Genesis 11, in the story of the tower of Babel, all the people had one language and they set out to make a name for themselves, to build a city, and to build a tower that reached to heaven. Seeing this, God was not pleased and decided to confuse their language and scatter the people.

This was a miracle that God performed as a curse and a rebuke to the pride of humanity.

The image of modernist towers blotting out the Toronto skyline, combined with the story of God's displeasure with the tower of Babel make for some potentially troubling questions for the religious in Toronto. Should we view the modern downtown as a misguided effort to construct a Babel-like city and interpret that as a sign of arrogance against God? Should Christians in particular feel uneasy about these obviously secular attempts to project human power?

In Acts 2, we have the day of Pentecost, which is also called the birth of the Christian Church. At this pivotal moment the followers of Christ are gathered in the upper room to pray, and they have a dramatic and amazing miracle of the Holy Spirit. These people were gathered from many regions, yet each of them heard the other speaking as if it were their own native language. In Acts 2 we are witnessing the reverse miracle to Genesis 11. In Genesis 11, God confuses the languages; in Acts 2 God unifies the languages. The result of this latter miracle was that the Christians went out in the power of the Holy Spirit and spread the message of Christ throughout the Roman Empire.

The issue we return to is the relationship of Christians with the city. If we take the view that the city is a concentration of human pride as evidenced by mighty towers, then we will have

a hard time discovering symbols of redemption in the urban environment. We will continue to hear stories of how people need to be saved from the oppressive forces and concentration of darkness in the city. This is unfortunate because Christians will continue to view the city with suspicion and seek to nurture their spiritual growth with retreats to nature, or solitude. With a negative view of the city Christians will deny the spiritual meaning of the urban built environment and will ignore the vibrant possibilities for connection, community, creativity, and human thriving that are present in the urban context.

Indeed, one thing that is often overlooked in the Genesis 11 narrative, but which is clearly there in the text, is God's affirmation of the amazing power of humanity, when it works together with a united purpose and language. The story of Genesis 11 is not an unmitigated condemnation of humanity's power, but includes an acknowledgement of the goodness that is part of the created order. God says: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." While God is certainly displeased with peoples' attempt to build their own monument to themselves, he does acknowledge that when people co-operate, they liberate an enormous amount of power that can make the impossible possible. In Acts 2, the liberation of created human potential through the gift of the Holy Spirit lead to the explosive growth of the Church throughout the Roman Empire. The growth of the church in Acts is an example of what the Christians were

able to accomplish when God gave them the gift of a unified language enabling them to work together for his purpose. For these first Christians, the miracle of Pentecost reversed the curse of Babel and the impossible became possible.

The miracle of Acts 2 occurred in a multicultural and multilingual setting. I would argue that this has direct bearing on Christians in Toronto. If the Pentecost experience is to be a model for our church today, then it is possible for us to co-operate and to unlock the power from God that comes when we work together. In addition to the miraculous work of God, there is also the creational affirmation from Genesis 11 from God that simply in our natural created state, when we co-operate, we can make the impossible possible. Are not then all things possible?

However, the story does not end here. In the New Testament book of Revelations we are presented with images of the heavenly city and images of the nations and tribes gathering in the holy city at the foot of the lamb. Is the heavenly City purely a work of God while we sit idly by and watch as God brings it about? Do we just wait for the heavenly city to show up at the end of time for a gathering of the nations? Clearly the answer to this is no. In Genesis 11 God affirms that he has already created us to be able to work together with our dear neighbour to make the impossible possible. And in Acts 2 he has given us the spirit to enable us to work in unity of purpose in order to make

the love of God credible. We have already been given what we need. Perhaps that black obelisk is not quite so intimidating and powerful after all.



Heikki Walden is a real estate agent in downtown Toronto, specializing in the sale of condos, lofts and unique urban spaces. He enjoys presenting his two-hour-long slide-show seminar called "Sidewalks in the Kingdom: Theology and the Built Environment in Toronto." His previous experience includes working for Citizens

for Public Justice in the area of affordable housing. He has volunteered for many organizations, including recently serving as a Warden at the Church of the Messiah (Anglican) in Toronto. He is a graduate of UBC, U of T and Regent College.

# BECOMING TROUBLE MAKERS

James Watson

The church must be a problem maker. If the church is serious in considering Jesus' invitation to "follow me," then it will problematize many of the social issues and unconscious behaviours present in the Canadian, urban environment. Problematization breaks free from status quo understandings and calls attention to moral and relational concerns that are considered "just the way things are." This creates problems for everyone. It rocks the boat of common discourse and practice in society and it can make people in the church feel very uncomfortable.

It is Jesus' fault. He frequently created problems and expected others to follow in his footsteps. There were the critiques of the religious leaders within Jesus' own faith community. He recognized the ability of the scribes to properly tithe even their herbs from their gardens, but lamented their neglect of justice, mercy and faith. There were the political comments, such as, "Give therefore to the government the things that are the government's, and to God the things that are God's." There were parables and bold pronouncements and cryptic statements that left his followers scratching their heads or wrestling with the implications. Jesus was not afraid to turn some popular conventions on their heads. He spoke of "servant leadership" when he washed the feet of his disciples, while one of his more outspoken friends complained that such a task was worthy of only the most lowly household servants. There is a cliché in Church circles that claims "Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable."

Problematization inspired by Jesus creates tension at multiple levels: within individual Christians, within churches and throughout the fabric of the neighbourhood or city. Christians who are engaged in the commerce and recreational activities of the city are confronted, at some level, with an affiliation to Jesus the problem maker. They must be willing to change their thinking and acting in response to their founder's prompting or risk exposure as hypocrites. The actual practices of reflection, interpretation and implementation can be contentious within church-

es when iron sharpens iron. The communication and interaction necessary to sort through the problems can be uncomfortable at best, and at worst tempers are lost—people can be damaged in the process. These risks continue as people of faith seek to live out this way of life in the public sphere.

A contentious and very Canadian example: There is a tendency towards reliance on tolerance as a Canadian response to diversity in the urban environment. There is self-righteous pride (and perhaps a hint of fear) concerning the media attention that some European countries have been attracting with regards to conflicts over minority integration within mainstream society, while the current “made in Canada” formula appears to be working. There is some justification for thinking that the Canadian mosaic looks pretty good. But churches that are surrounded by these diversities must problematize this issue because Jesus calls followers to “love your neighbour,” not “tolerate your neighbour.” Tolerance may be a component of love, but it does not reach far enough. Tolerance holds the other at arm’s length while love invites an embrace. Toleration might allow for recognition of the “other,” but it does not invite the other to draw close, to change us, to transform who we are through meaningful relationship.

What are the implications when I ride the transit system with strangers or when someone lobbies for changes to legislation or when a neighbour has trampled the carrots in my community garden plot? Loving neighbours requires actual presence and

passion in events in the life of the city. The church is called to be present in the streets, hospitals, hostels, hospices, schools, neighbourhood parties, businesses, civic meetings and jails.

In public life this line of thinking challenges what is perceived to be a good thing. If the caulking between the pieces of the mosaic remains firm, the chances of miscommunication and clash of cultures might be lessened. Reaching beyond tolerance runs the risk of being misunderstood or, worse yet, of actually being ignorant and inappropriate. Yet what will hold the fabric of society together other than meaningful relationships that stretch across differences? The entire concept of tolerance may be a step in the right direction, but what is the next step beyond tolerance? These societal issues cannot be decided by the church. That being said, the church should try to be respectfully present at the table, if for no other reasons than to point to deeper issues, to constructively problematize the present and to try to learn how to live differently.

Engagement in public conversation and personal commitments to activism are reflections of the tradition that has been handed down from the founder of the church. Jesus asked questions and challenged listeners to look under the surface of what was generally accepted in order to understand what was deeper and more meaningful. While the manufacture of problems, where apparently there were none, may not seem to be a beneficial exercise, it does present the possibility of alternate

realities. If those alternate realities can be dreamed together, they can make the city a better place.



James Watson is a husband, father, church member, student, adjunct Bible college instructor and employee of a Christian church organization. He spends his time playing with Legos, watching children's television, doing laundry, studying and talking with church leaders (not necessarily in that order).

## CONCLUSION KNEE-DEEP IN *HOT FUZZ*

Robert Joustra

"You take nice, good-natured, welcoming people and throw them into a town hall meeting somewhere, and they'll tear each other's eyes out." The director of a downtown Salvation Army outlet was just warming up, telling me about some of the challenges of his day-to-day work. He had stories about Ivy League professors, lawyers, and even priests and pastors campaigning against the operations of the Salvation Army. The Army's crime? They'd started operations in a nice part of town. *There goes the neighbourhood!*



The Salvation Army director taught me that professionals whose self-described vocations were to help those in need, to teach, to mentor and to promote law and justice fall victim to the NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) Syndrome, just like everyone else. We rarely like taking our own medicine, and these folks were no different. No level of governance is as open or intimate as municipal consultations. Do we design this park like this, or like that? Do we allow this re-zoning or that re-zoning, and how exactly do we deal with all those different colours of garage doors on Elm Street? Municipal consultations are the church hockey league of politics. You’ll never believe what your neighbours are capable of saying and doing in those settings.

Our cities are repositories of our deep passions because they are a microcosm of our shared life together. Cities don’t have the grand politics of war and peace, the high-rolling international trade treaties, or the silver-tongued, sharply dressed diplomats, but they embody stories about common life that big-time national and international politics don’t tell. I once had a priest say to me, “Show me your bedroom, and I’ll show you who you are.” Similarly, I suggest, take me to your cities, your local places where you live out your everyday social reflexes, and I’ll show you who you are.

At the conclusion of this book it seems appropriate to reflect on some of the themes and assumptions that have been challenged, that have helped us to “think different” than we did be-

fore. I profile five urban assumptions that are challenged—both of faith and otherwise—which help us rethink our urban social architecture. These are not philosophical blockbusters or high-level policy problems, but they do point to revealing social and cultural assumptions that are in dire need of fresh imagination.

### **Assumption #1: “Cities = Politics.”**

**Reply: Sort of**—but it really depends on how you define “city.” At least two useful distinctions should be made between the City and the city, as defined by David Koyzis in *Comment*. The City is a political community, a unit of local government, a municipality. According to Koyzis, “[the City] is a political subcommunity within the larger body politic.” The City has a variety of competencies and responsibilities which are significantly political. In this first sense, the City is about politics and the pursuit of justice. But as Jonathan Chaplin writes, a City or political municipality is “but one of many communities inhabiting the second sense of the term ‘city’.” Koyzis defines a city, with a lowercase “c”, as a “multifaceted network of local, differentiated communities—a community of communities.”

The difference here is critical. Too often we associate “cities” with the politics of “the City”, as though our municipal administrators retain comprehensive responsibility for the entire variety of activities that take place within its jurisdictional boundaries. Some City Councils seem to feel this is true—but it is not.

The city as a network of differentiated communities contains a whole variety of authorities and institutions—often labelled under the nebulous term *civil society*—which contribute vitally to urban growth and revitalization. The City as a political body must occasionally adjudicate how these different communities can and should relate to each other, but it is not responsible for cultivating an exquisite arts community, or a flourishing non-profit sector. Governments can pass family-friendly tax laws, but they should not try and legislate how frequently people make love. It may pass laws and provide incentive to *facilitate* certain things, but politics—even municipal politics—cannot and should not be all things to all people.

Chaplin writes, “The notion of public justice . . . does not at all imply that governments have no jurisdiction at all in areas like business or education, as libertarians—and some of their misguided Christian apologists—absurdly propose. It implies, rather, that such jurisdiction must always be pursuant to, and so constrained and disciplined by, the clear and compelling imperatives of the *public good*.”

**Assumption #2: “We must keep Church and State separate.”**

**Reply: Absolutely.** Separation of church and state is an imperative founding principle of the American and Canadian political systems. In this context, separation of church and state means that the state doesn’t endorse or privilege one religion

over another; it is, at least ostensibly, a neutral space in which different perspectives, religious and otherwise, contest, debate and decide on the appropriate dispensation of *justice*.

This does not mean that religion is inadmissible in public debate, and it certainly doesn’t mean religion should be marginalized. Some go so far as to argue that the Constitution of the United States, in explicitly protecting freedom of religion, is implicitly suggesting that religion itself is a *public good*—one for which the state should safeguard a place in a democratic society.

Following this logic, it is worth considering that the separation of church and state was never meant to indicate a chasm of dialogue or the cultivation of religious illiteracy, even though we often uncover both of these errors. Like business, religion is not within City governments’ competency to specifically endorse, but it is in the cities’—and therefore the City’s—best interest to provide the conditions within which business and religion, in general, may flourish.

The American First Amendment to the Constitution means more than religious *tolerance*—it means religious *freedom*. Tolerance, at best, means respecting views with which we disagree. This implies that we are putting up with something problematic, divisive and even potentially evil. By contrast, religious freedom can be understood as the embracing and defending of a human good, a political achievement by the democratic state that

protects both religious and nonreligious citizens and promotes the common good. It permits religious communities to employ their religious beliefs in democratic debate on the same basis as other institutions in civil society. Such debate is an important first step toward what Scott Thomas, author of *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*, calls a *rooted cosmopolitanism*—an ethic which points to common virtues and practices within different traditions, rather than the alleged universalism of liberal or secularist values based on an Enlightenment rationality.

**Assumption #3: “Working with government corrupts religious communities.”**

**Reply: Sure**—and hanging out with people who believe differently corrupts you too. But avoiding different people is not only silly, but socially and politically destructive; this assumption is a corollary of the separation between church and state argument from the other side of the fence.

Throughout my research at Cardus, I have found that this fear in churches, like people, is linked to identity. Almost every church in a downtown area has struggled with it. Do we join a meals-on-wheels program? Do we open food banks or shelters? In the midst of pressing need, how do we prevent our church from losing its integrity and becoming just another non-governmental social service agency? Government programs are

often the only financially sustainable way to cultivate a service agenda, but participation in them spirals into further identity conflicts about public service, confessional language, and proselytization. The price tag on government money for most orthodox religious institutions is just too high.

It doesn't need to be. Working with governments—in any way—doesn't have to corrupt religion, water down mission, or turn confessions insipid. Yes, government works with its own public, and at times secularist, agenda, one which may inhibit traditional proselytization. It seems to me, though, that communities can benefit from attending to a favourite axiom of a good friend of mine: that the journey *in* must always fund the journey *out*. One of the principle functions of a religious community is to facilitate this journey *in*, a robust and active encounter with the religious narrative which forms the identity and mission of its community. Surely a community consistently nurtured and rooted in a historical tradition of confession can retain a strong identity, in the midst of cooperation and conversation with those who believe differently, and perhaps—*à la* secularists—those we even perceive as being directly at odds with us?

Religious communities are far more than social service agencies; nevertheless, the toxicity of government cheques or public moneys is exaggerated. When government money occasionally comes tied to expectations that overstep the legitimate authority of government, a religious community with a strong,

confessional identity should be able to wisely discern and decline; however, where institutional religion's own sphere of activity genuinely overlaps and interrelates with the government's, a *rooted cosmopolitan* engagement is essential.

#### **Assumption #4: "Cities = \$."**

**Reply: Often true.** Last October I was in Calgary hearing from municipal politicians and activists whose most pressing question could be summarized as: "How can we ride the wave of global capitalism in ways that promote human scale flourishing?" Cities, just like the rest of society, tend to uncritically ride the money train. Corporations and developers, responding to supply and (occasionally artificially-stimulated) demand are the ones who effectively build the social and physical infrastructure of our cities. "More and more," writes Jonathan Chaplin, "the modern city is moulded in the image of and at the behest of purely economic forces. Housing and infrastructural developments follow the homogenizing imperatives of corporate growth, instead of economic activities organized to serve human, social and environmental flourishing." City government might facilitate this, but often they dare not get in the way; as our friend Thomas Friedman would remind us, if you want success and profit above all else you wear the golden *straightjacket*. Then you find that you live in a world where, as Margaret Thatcher used to say, "There is no alternative."

There is always an alternative, but I admit it's often not all that easy to see. It is an important first step to refrain from demonizing part of the urban economic process, recognizing that city politicians are not weak-kneed opportunists incapable of tough action, urban developers are not heartless capitalists eager to undermine human scale community and the average consumer is not a mindless cog in the capitalist machine, out to *buy* his or her way into an ultimately satisfying identity. These are unfair caricatures that reveal more about our cynicism and apathy than they do about the cultural climate.

Secondly, we must recognize that urban development is a city-wide problem, not merely a City government problem. If we are out to decisively win the battle for our cities in zoning meetings, town hall forums and council chambers, we've already lost. Politics is downstream of culture, and the culture is saturated with global capitalism.

Thirdly, global capitalism *itself* is not what's wrong. Markets, the buying and selling of *goods*, and even supply and demand are good things that need to be defended in what has become an orgy of anti-capitalist propaganda. What we need are imaginative solutions to put proper boundaries on the market. The question is not "Markets: yes or no?" but rather, "How do we again orient markets to be at the service of human beings, to promote social and cultural flourishing in our cities?" In many

ways, developers are caught in this question in the same way as the consumer or the City politician. One of the most exciting projects Cardus is involved in is bringing together roundtables of developers and municipal administrators to creatively probe this question. The answers are far from obvious, and there is a great deal of tough work to be done.

### **Assumption #5: “We need Action!”**

Reply: Ok, but we’ve been taking action, and it’s been a spectacular failure. Evangelical Christians in particular have mustered enormous political and social activism in the last decade, and seen incredible success in putting “their people” into the centre of power. Michael Lindsay in *Faith in the Halls of Power* argues that evangelicals have been punching way above their weight in American political circles. But John Seel, responding to Lindsay’s book, argues that the glut of evangelical political activism hasn’t achieved the sort of results they wanted. A sudden influx of evangelical people and money into the realm of politics hasn’t solved a great deal, because it’s not just about getting people into power or onto the streets to make change happen—it’s about the *quality* of those people, that change, and the means used. “Our people” are in position, but they’re not *who* they need to be, where they are. Religious people often agree we need people in power, but outside of hot-button social

agendas, we’re not exactly sure why, or what being religious has to do with, say, zoning by-laws or regional trade corridors.

I attended a Canadian university in the dead of winter. One fateful day, with snow drifts besieging doorways and loved ones and possessions lost in the wintry desolation, some friends of mine set out for “action.” Love of neighbour compelled them to take to the roads to assist beleaguered travellers. And so, with hearts full of good will, hands full of shovels, trunks packed with sand, cars equipped with balding summer tires, and discretion and common sense gusting away in gale force winds, they set out. I donned a bathrobe and settled in with hot chocolate and a trusted fantasy novel.

Suffice it to say they received far more help than they delivered, as—predictably—they themselves ran stuck time after time. The experiment in neighbour love was a complete train wreck. In Cardus’ *Toronto the Good* project I later learned that this kind of unprepared, ill-considered activism is endemic to Christian urban engagement. In the city of Toronto, faith groups—often those from outside the greater Toronto area—frequently undermine the efforts of city governments and experienced NGOs to alleviate street poverty and homelessness. Parachuting Bible-tract-armed adolescents with blankets, food stuffs and toiletries into an urban core creates far more problems than it solves. The words that city managers and municipal

administrators had for this kind of irresponsible and disconnected activism were not kind.

Thomas Farr tells a similar story in *World of Faith and Freedom*, recalling how Bob Seiple—the former US Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom—made searing criticisms of ill-informed and culturally clueless American missionaries. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, Seiple said that Western missionaries who descended on Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union were like “the great Oklahoma land rush; everybody threw their Bibles into the back of their Conestoga wagons and came running.” In his mind it constituted “an assault on Russia,” and as a result, the Orthodox Church partnered with the Russian government to pass laws restricting religious freedom—laws that would take years to undo.

Mothers were right after all: think before you act—and, to extend the logic of working in an urban environment—play well with others.

### **Lessons from *Hot Fuzz***

In the 2007 blockbuster movie *Hot Fuzz*, Sergeant Nicholas Angel is assigned to the idyllic country village of Sandford, consistent winner of the “Village of the Year” contest. He soon pieces together that, years ago, on the eve of the contest adjudicator’s arrival, sleepy Sandford was suddenly overrun by “dog

muck, thieving kids and crusty jugglers.” The loss of the contest devastated the Chief Inspector’s wife, Irene, who lost her mind and drove her Datsun Cherry into Sandford Gorge. “From that moment on, I swore I would do her proud,” promised the Chief Inspector. The Inspector, along with other influential townspeople, form the Neighbourhood Watch Alliance, a crypto-fascist wing of the town’s award committee, to ensure that Sandford will never lose the award again.

The people of Sandford lost faith in the institutions and people in their town to work together and create a better village. Even the town’s priest—who appropriately screams “Jesus Christ!” after being shot in the arm—lost faith. The Neighbourhood Watch Alliance was ultimately pessimistic that Sandford—without their (violent) intervention and (draconian) guidance—could succeed.

For people who are supposed to have “reason at all times for the hope we have,” religious people tend to be curiously pessimistic about our villages and cities. We wash our hands of our markets and decry the consumerism of our neighbours. We complain that our City councils won’t hear religious perspectives, but privately avoid people who do not believe as we do. We may even completely excuse ourselves of a responsibility to the common good of our cities, consigning them to burn in the fires of avarice, and hoping only to save a few worthy souls who may join us in eternal enlightenment.

Our goals, when they are worthy, tend to overemphasize ends and underemphasize means. Like the Neighbourhood Watch Alliance of Sandford, we're guilty of violently pursuing our cultural and political ends, believing in an ultimate vindication through the righteousness of the cause. But our means matter. They may even be decisively important. The observations made in this book about our assumptions suggest that our common sense isn't always right, and we—as religious and as society—need space and time to rethink, research and rebuild better and more sophisticated and imaginative alternatives. Then our social, civil and municipal victories won't be over the bodies of our neighbours, but will be hard-won success amongst religious and non-religious alike.

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Robert Joustra is a Researcher with Cardus, serving as Associate Editor of *Policy in Public and Comment*. He lectures in international politics and foreign policy at Redeemer University College and is currently pursuing a PhD in international politics at the University of Bath (U.K.).

He is author of *Toronto the Good* and assistant editor, with Jonathan Chaplin, of the forthcoming book *God and Global Order: Religion and American Foreign Policy* (Baylor University Press, 2010).

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