

THINKING AHEAD

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The Newsletter of Vision Ministries Canada

We Must Return to the Founder

BY JAY GURNETT

“The Gospel has a face... Jesus is the good news... He is our only point of recalibration.” These words from missiologist Alan Hirsch gave just the right twist to **Thinking Shrewdly 2018**’s focus on *Finding Our Voice: Proclaiming the Gospel*. Many of the 200+ leaders and participants from the Vision Ministries partnering network who gathered on April 17/18 for this annual event in Waterloo ON, were challenged by Hirsch’s reframing of the mission of the church.



Important Announcement:

National, Regional, National, Regional

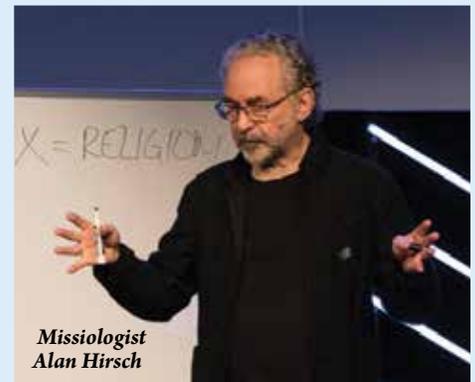
At Thinking Shrewdly, we announced the decision to change the spring National gathering to an every-other-year event. Arising out of a desire to build strong regions and involve more leaders (not just full-time pastors), in spring 2019 there will be at least five Saturday gatherings across the country. These one-day inexpensive events, nearer to home, will continue to build the network and inspire us to be on mission together. Then there will be a national gathering in Waterloo in 2020, and then regional gatherings in 2021, and so on.

Lots was happening during this national consultation at Creekside Church:

- the customary rich mix of fellowship/networking and lots of good food
- main sessions featuring: three thoughtful times with Hirsch; smart hosting by Lincoln Road Chapel’s Michelle Gowland; a strong call from Vision’s Mike Stone; meaningful worship with Victoria’s Scott Anderson and Vancouver’s Vania Levans; early morning contemplation led by Andy Perrett and Mark and Petra Anderson; Siamak Shafti-Keramat, Gord Martin, Binghai Zeng shedding light on bridging the gap between new and established Canadians; a sharp panel discussion; and story after story of real people on mission in real neighbourhoods and sub-cultures across Canada
- six mid-size cultural engagement seminars and fifteen smaller peer learning forums led by smart thinker/practitioners from across the network

It was a good event, pulled off by skilled Vision staff including Henrietta Koenig and Cole McFarlane, assisted by a passel of volunteers.

However, all of this is relatively insignificant, if it didn’t contribute to



Missiologist
Alan Hirsch

the master plan of bringing every thing together under Jesus; and sending his followers out on the same mission that he was sent on.

That was what we were trying to understand better together. Whether it was David Cottrill helping us figure out *Christian Community Development and Verbal Witness*, James Kelly of Faith Tech giving us insight into *Sharing the Gospel in a Digital Age*, or Tim Fletcher reminding us about *Speaking Good News to those Suffering Trauma, Addiction & Mental Illness*, the main point was always: how do we share Jesus?

And of course that’s been the main point from the beginning.

It’s easy for a **church planting**

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Forest Brook Community Church, Ajax, ON

BY SANDRA REIMER

“God, what are we missing?” Prayed Kevin Armstrong and the leadership team at Forest Brook Community Church about five years ago. Located in a suburban neighbourhood of Ajax, ON, the 36-year-old congregation was hardworking and had good programs, but they weren’t seeing as much fruit as they expected. God showed them that they needed to focus on prayer. Today, they treat prayer as an “absolute necessity”, not an afterthought.

One program into which they now incorporate more prayer is their one-week children’s summer camp. “A team prays each morning before the camp starts. As people register, we watch and pray over the children and their families,” says Kevin, who has been a pastor at the church for 15 years. Each summer, approximately 160 children attend the camp for JK to Grade 6—80% are from the community. When children are too old to be campers, they are invited to be camp counsellors, again most are not church kids. “This gives us an additional four or five years working with the youth,” says Kevin.

Two years ago, the Lord invited the congregation to a deeper level of prayer. “We began to learn listening prayer,” says Kevin. This has significantly shifted the way Forest Brook does ministry. “We listen to God and join him where he is working.” This has meant doing fewer programs, which leaves more energy and resources to focus on what God is asking them to do. Deploying resources effectively is critical for a congregation of 400 households with many busy



Pastor Kevin Armstrong (3rd from left) and the Forest Brook Community Church pastoral staff with sports announcer Herbie Kuhn and the grey cup.

“In the last two years, we have sensed forward momentum and God’s presence in a new way.”

— Kevin Armstrong, Senior Pastor, Forest Brook Community Church

suburbanite commuters who are often cash-strapped due to mortgage and other debt.

This shift to “relying less on themselves and more on the Holy Spirit” has resulted in God opening some surprising doors for Forest Brook and multiplying their fruit. Though Ajax is the most diverse city in Durham Region, Forest Brook did not fully reflect that diversity. Last year, God brought it to Kevin’s attention that their vibrant and growing youth ministry was not reaching the black youth who lived in the area. As part of their commitment to be “the presence of God in their neighbourhood,” the church rents out their gym to teachers

from the local high school for a March Break basketball camp, which is attended by many young black men. This summer, Forest Brook will collaborate on a 7-week basketball camp run by these teachers—one of whom is Christian. The church plans to hire a Christian intern who will build relationships with the youth and administrate the camp on behalf of Forest Brook.

Kevin and the Forest Brook leadership team are confident that they are on the right path. “In the last two years, we have sensed forward momentum and God’s presence in a new way.” Kevin adds, “No matter what happens, we are focused on the right things.” ■

...CONTINUED FROM COVER

organization and network to fall into the trap of taking the one key tool it has (call it a hammer) —and end up seeing everything as a nail. For example, a case can be made that the Book of Acts, is all about **church planting**. And who could argue that **church planting** is a bad thing?

But even if you take chapters such as

Acts 18-20, where it seems clear that church planting teams are establishing new churches in Corinth and Ephesus; when you step back just a tiny bit, you are caught again by sentence after sentence that reminds us that the focus is proclaiming Jesus. For example, Paul says in chapter 20:

(vs21) “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God

in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” Or (vs24) “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

Thinking Shrewdly 2018, was about proclaiming Jesus—the plan from *before* day one—the continuing mission of his followers through the end of the age. ■

A Call to Collaborate Across Cultures

BY SANDRA REIMER

Originally from Iran, Siamak shepherds a Farsi-speaking congregation in Toronto and connects with a network of Farsi believers, Bible study groups and churches across Canada and the world. Binghai pastors a Toronto China Bible Church congregation in North York.

Both said that attending a gathering with Canadian-born Christian leaders can be awkward. "I am so intimidated to go into their circles. I am hoping they approach me and ask me questions," says Binghai. He adds, "Both sides need to sacrifice a little—die to pride and make the connection." Siamak believes the gap between immigrant and Canadian-born leaders is natural. "It's like a battery; there is a gap between positive and negative terminals, but you have power when there is a mediator," said Siamak, referring to Christ as the one who connects us.

Binghai and Siamak believe they have something to offer their Canadian colleagues. Siamak says, "Caucasians are very organized, sometimes they are too organized. Our churches can help them learn a balance." A former atheist and communist who is trained as a computer programmer, Binghai heard about Jesus through a campus ministry at the University of Alberta.

Commenting on what immigrants can contribute, Binghai joked, "We have Chinese food," then added more seriously, "and we have lots of amazing testimonies about how people came to Christ."

Grateful for his collaboration with Canadian Christians, Binghai says, "One of the things I appreciate most about Canadian churches is their rich faith heritage and the Christ-like life that naturally flows out of their daily living. These have been such a blessing to us new Christians."

VMC's Associate Director, Gord Martin, added: "The Global South and East have a more radical Church. They have boldness in vision, evangelistic fervor, and belief in prayer." Gord is grateful that VMC has gradually expanded from working with just two immigrant churches to 40 — with more ethnic planters requesting assistance all the time. It breaks his heart that many New Canadian leaders must work menial secular jobs to provide for their families when they could be ministering full-time. He says, "Some of the best missionaries who already speak the language are right here in Canada, but they are under-resourced." ■

To support a new Canadian pastor, contact gord.martin@vision-ministries.org

"Both sides need to sacrifice a little—die to pride and make the connection."

— Binghai Zeng, pastor, Toronto China Bible Church

At Thinking Shrewdly, Siamak Shafiq-Keramat (centre) and Binghai Zeng (left) shared experiences and wisdom about the cultural gap between immigrant church planters/pastors and their Canadian-born peers.



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THINKING SHREWDLY 2018 Finding



Julia Atkinson attended the consultation for the first time with her brother Timothy and parents Chris and Rowan Atkinson. Chris pastors Pinewoods Chapel, while Rowan runs a business (or two). Julia was inspired by the teaching at the conference—including the peer learning forums on Finding Jesus at Art Galleries, Night Clubs, and Slam Poetry Competitions (Randy Hein) and Sharing the Gospel in the Digital Age (James Kelly). She plans to be a godly business woman like her mom.



Vision Ministries' Mike Stone set the stage for the Thinking Shrewdly consultation theme, Finding our Voice: Proclaiming the Gospel. "In an age of 'nones and dones' and the disappearance of nominal believers, are some of us losing confidence in the gospel?...Is our dearth of verbal witness due to spiritual narcissism? We need focused time for gathering and deeper discipleship, but if we fail to proclaim the crucified, resurrected Christ, then we grieve the heart of God... We have lost our way when it comes to having conversations about Jesus with those who don't know him... Many of us find ourselves in relationships, where we are embodying the gospel, but they want us to tell the stories of the one we follow. Are we going to speak?"



Shaina Morgan, who ministers to people in poverty with her husband Dave in the Whalley neighbourhood of Surrey, BC, compares the life of a church planters' wife to an amusement park ride. "We get to be part of the greatest ride—it's thrilling and exciting. I have the privilege of living with God on mission... Some days I just want to go on the merry-go-around or the predictable ferris wheel. This work of [church planting] is not for the faint of heart. There is a battle as we fight for souls and tether ourselves to our Father. The enemy is fighting for those same souls."



VMC staffer Jay Gurnett introduced quads that enabled people to connect throughout ThinkingShrewdly in groups of four. "Relationships are the glue of ministry... Man, I love a whole bunch of these people (looking out on the crowd)."

Our Voice Proclaiming the Gospel



In high school, 19-year-old Eric Vinels-Bell was friends with Church Planter Kevin Mast's daughter. One Sunday, Kevin invited Eric to help set up for church. Curious about Christianity because of a church-attending grandfather, Eric stayed for the service. Over time, he gradually moved toward Christ as he saw transformation in the people at Hope Church who had been addicted to drugs. Now as an intern with the congregation, Eric helps to serve people in poverty in downtown Barrie, ON. "I want to do life with people in a godly way and I feel like that happens in a Christ-centered community." He came to the TS2018 to learn more.

In his Peer Learning Forum, Randy Hein said, "In the 1970s and 80s we had a robust Christian culture—alternative art, novels, music etc... Our subculture rent us from cultural influence." As a young man, Randy preferred mainstream music. "Secular musicians were ready to courageously explore real issues and didn't feel compelled to tie it up in a family friendly way." He is thankful artists who are Christian are taking their place as influential public communicators once again.



Missiologist Alan Hirsch challenged us to get reacquainted with Jesus. "The church in the West needs re-founding. We need to go back to the founder. We need a recalibration... How do we know if we got God right? The only way to do so, is to know Jesus Christ... If we don't get this right, we go forward with toxic religion... Jesus came to bring an anti-religion—to tear down structures meant to contain God... Jesus and religion don't mix. Jesus has a hard time with religious folks and they have a hard time with him."

"We are embodying the gospel in relationships, but people want us to tell the stories of the one we follow. Are we going to speak?"

– Mike Stone, VMC ED

NEWS & EVENTS

VMC is looking for entrepreneurial young leaders who want to gain hands-on experience. Beginning as early as September 2018, internships will be available in London, ON, Hamilton, ON and Victoria, BC.

Under the guidance of a seasoned practitioner, interns will spend 16-24 hours/week assisting to start a new congregation for a period of 12-24 months. We hope to provide a communal learning experience with at least three interns serving in each context. Practical learning will be supplemented with weekly reading, instruction, reflection and discussion.

During two off-site intensives, interns from all locations will gather to learn from veteran church planters and each other.

Interns can supplement these unpaid internships through part-time employment in the community. Though host churches are willing to help interns find accommodations and possible employment, interns are fully responsible to manage their living arrangements and financial affairs.

If you're wired to start new things, this combination of practical learning, reflection and focused goal-



First cohort of young catalysts.

setting will shape you as a catalytic leader and prepare you for a life of initiating new things for the kingdom. Interested or know of a young leader who might be? Contact mike.stone@vision-ministries.org.

Minister in Kenya This Summer—Or Support Those Who Go: Join Doug Loveday and a teaching team from the VMC Network August 2-13, 2018 to share God's Word and equip our African brothers and sisters in Nairobi, Kenya and rural areas. To join the team or support this effort contact doug.loveday@vision-ministries.org.

SUBURBAN CHURCH PROFILE

Charleswood Community Church, Winnipeg MB

BY COURTNEY VAN ROOTSELAAR



Gavin Hall

Originally a church plant that met in a high school, Charleswood Community Church relocated to a prosperous, middle-class suburb of Winnipeg MB when a Baptist church generously gave them a building in 1990. In 2002, they expanded the church from about 120 seats to 300. "There's room at the table for everybody," says lead pastor Gavin Hall, who focuses on teaching the Word of God without getting lost in the rules and expectations of religion and society. "We're solid at the core and loose at the edges."

Gavin adds, "Like most typical Canadians, folks in our area tend to view their lives as something to curate—collecting experiences and pursuing achievement." Many see faith in the same way, "as something good, but largely irrelevant to their daily lives." To bridge the growing disconnect between people and the church, Gavin teaches that the gospel is



more than just a story, and that faith is not only relevant, but essential to daily living. He longs to see the gospel continue to be lived out by his 175 or so congregation members.

"God is showing us that the typical way the church worked has perhaps become routine and a little stale." Charleswood CC is approaching ministry a little differently these days, as they tailor programs to meet people in the midst of their busy lives.

For example, their women's ministry decided to provide a fitness class for the community instead of running another Bible study. By offering an activity that would typically be held outside the church,

they have found a way to draw new people while demonstrating the simplicity of integrating faith and life. "Formal outreach and ministry are still vital," Gavin stresses, "but meeting people where they are is shaping how we conceive and deliver such activities."

As Christianity seems to become less relevant, Charleswood Community Church presses on—striving to be the salt and light in their community. "Above all, we need to keep creatively and faithfully declaring the gospel to our friends and neighbours [and to be a] place where people experience grace, forgiveness, and acceptance." ■



In February 2018, VMC Staff, Gord Martin and Mike Stone met with church leaders from Australia, Canada, Colombia, England, Ethiopia, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Hungary, Kenya, New Zealand, Romania, Rwanda, Uganda, USA and Zambia. Leaders agreed to collaborate on church strengthening and planting.

Global Leaders Gathered for Sharing the Vision

BY GORD MARTIN

In February 2018, 26 leaders from 17 countries gathered in Paris for three days to participate in a developing initiative of Vision Ministries Canada called Sharing the Vision. Individuals invited to this consultation are leading or helping to lead national organizations whose primary purposes include: evangelistic church planting, improving the leadership capacity of established churches and cultivating a network of partnering churches. Leaders from each country made a presentation on those three themes, explaining what was going well and what challenges they were facing—there were 18 presentations in all. The conference room, corridors and cafeteria were alive with conversation throughout our time together!

This event was the first of its kind and was the culmination of 1.5 years' of work

by myself and John Riley (a key VMC volunteer). All churches and church networks represented have a Plymouth Brethren (or Christian Brethren) history. Since organized and intentional leadership has not been a historic priority among these churches, everyone was eager to learn from each other.

The Gospel of God (Romans 1:1) is flourishing, especially in the southern and eastern hemispheres. Talk about diversity! In Romania, the leaders of the organization are paid by the government. In India, our brothers and sisters are experiencing serious hardship, danger and persecution. Leaders from the African and Latin American countries,

described how churches are being planted, leaders are being trained and churches are working together. New organizations have also begun in Australia and New Zealand. I was interested to hear of the deliberate and persistent efforts being made to advance the Gospel in Germany, France and the UK. Isaac Shaw from India and our own Mike Stone both spoke stirringly on what it takes to lead a national organization of this kind. Some of our intended next steps:

- Form an international team to advance our agenda
- Create an online forum for sharing resources
- Initiate a series of video conferences
- Regularly communicate with participants We are very grateful for God's guidance and superintendence. Please pray this effort will result in advancing the Gospel and strengthening churches everywhere! ■

The Gospel of God is flourishing, especially in the southern and eastern hemispheres.

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The Burbs— More Mission Field Now Than Ever

Full article available at www.vision-ministries.org/burbs/

BY MIKE STONE

Remember the August 2003 power blackout that temporarily paralyzed the eastern half of our continent? Without electricity for air conditioners, appliances and entertainments systems, people were on the street talking, eating, watching children play and enjoying each other's company—a different kind of electricity. Years later a neighbour lamented that he had not experienced that kind of meaningful neighbourhood togetherness since. His bemoaning was an indictment on suburban life.

"By the turn of the century, even the Church realized that suburbia's deficiency was an opportunity for mission."

Suburban living became popular in the mid-20th century as people fled the chaos and complexities of the city in search of tranquility. Cheap land at the city's edge made homes affordable. In his book *Suburban Christian*, Albert Y Hsu, says that suburbs are little more than clusters of autonomous individuals, offering a façade of community without any meaningful togetherness.

Sociologists denounced suburbia's deprivation in the decades that followed. Eventually architects and city planners modified home construction, adding verandas to the front, moving the garage

to the rear and reducing distance between front doors. By the turn of the century, even the Church realized suburbia's deficiency was an opportunity for mission. Sermons called for incarnational witness, the priority shifted from church programs to faithful parish presence and the people of God were sent out to cultivate transcendent togetherness in the neighbourhood.

Though not always first to act, the Church is best equipped to nurture community. Aware that each person is made in the image of God—the Eternal Dance of Three—we know people were created for community. We believe that God is reconciling all things in Christ and that we are agents of this reconciliation. We know that the Spirit has empowered us to live out kingdom one-anothers as a sign of God's new humanity. The cultivation of genuine community in the world is central to the Church's mandate.

If alienation in the burbs isn't daunting enough, recent shifts in our social landscape will generate further missional challenge. Over the last two decades, the new urban elite (young, affluent, talented, technically savvy and tolerant) have begun moving to the once forsaken urban core. The migration of the rich to the city centre is displacing the poor to the burbs. Recently arrived immigrants are settling

directly in the outer regions of our largest metropolitan areas. Aging infrastructure is beginning to show signs of physical deterioration. The suburban poor are more isolated from employment opportunities and social services than their counterparts in the urban core.

Is the suburban church up for the challenge?

To begin with, have we learned from the missteps of the previous generation—a church that left the urban core for a better life in the burbs, unwittingly compounding the larger social crisis? Will any from the emerging generation stay in the burbs for the sake of mission, to offer the gift of presence and stability?

As the Lord welcomes us weekly to his table, will we likewise offer hospitality to the strangers that have come to our land? To the growing poor among us, will we merely bless them with a "keep warm and well fed" but do nothing about their physical needs—what good is that? (James 2:16)

Beyond care for the least and lonely, is the suburban church—it's brightest and most innovative—prepared to join civic efforts to revitalize and beautify our social spaces? What can we offer? Imaginations shaped by blueprints of the Garden and the New Jerusalem. ■



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