



# A Fresh Imagination

Creating Space For The Next Generation

BY MATT PAMPLIN

## THINKING AHEAD

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Before COVID, I was invited to a gathering of regional church Leaders because the church I was part of had a large number of young families and young adults. In classic fashion they asked what our “secret” was. I didn’t have an answer. We were just a newer church plant trying to follow Jesus; we weren’t edgy or cool.



we passing on?” or “How are we creating space for the next generation?”

In the midst of COVID, the British theologian NT Wright said, “If all we learn from COVID as a church is how to do a better livestream service we may have missed what God is saying.” We can all acknowledge that the church in the West is in a broken and humbled place. We need fresh imagination and renewed courage to take risks and for Jesus’ historic call not to “pour new wine into old wineskins.”

### At the end of April, VMC hosted a special edition of the Thinking Shrewdly conference for young leaders under 40.

At this same meeting we talked about raising up new leaders and investing in the next generation. It struck me that what we do here and now impacts the future and the fruit we will bear. I am in ministry because someone invested in me in my younger years.

When pastoring, it’s easy to myopically focus on today without asking, “What are

At the end of April, VMC hosted a special edition of the Thinking Shrewdly conference for young leaders under 40. Sixty leaders, nominated by VMC churches, gathered to learn, share, reflect and pray on the theme “A Fresh Imagination”.

This was the first time we used our national gathering to create space for the

next generation to lead, and to support and encourage them in such a focused way. This event was for young leaders in the church, as well as influencers in education, business, entertainment, healthcare, and the arts.

VMC invests in young leaders because we see them as the future of the church. When you review church and revival history, it always starts with young people. An old proverb says, “A wise man plants a tree whose shade he knows he will never sit in”. We need to plant so the next generation can enjoy the fruits.

My prayer was that Jesus would meet people at our conference and that they would receive healing and hope. I prayed that their dreams would be rekindled. Read some of what leaders and participants had to say in the next few pages. ■

### IN THIS ISSUE

Faithfulness Across Generations	p2-3
Doing Life With Neighbours	p3
Thinking Shrewdly 2023	p4
Making Church a Place Young People Don’t Want to Leave	p 6
Step Aside But Don’t Disappear	p8



Oak Park Church of Christ staff, left to right standing: Ben Joubert, Shelley Potts, Lane Scruggs, Sara Egely. Left to right seated: Alvin Ram, Dawn Driedger.

# Faithfulness Across Generations

Oak Park Church of Christ, Calgary, AB

BY SANDRA REIMER

“Our desire as a church is to be present where God is present,” says Sara Egely, Family Ministries pastor at Oak Park Church of Christ in Calgary. **For the 6-member staff team at Oak Park, faithfulness “is less about a model [of ministry] than seeing where God is at work and being faithful to join him,”** says Lead Pastor Lane Scruggs. He adds, “When we see God working, we use our resources, energy, and time to invest in the kingdom.”

**The team gives the example of leaning into what God is doing among Indigenous people and through their food bank.** “About five years ago,

[Indigenous people] started coming to the church for prayer and counselling,” says Lane. In response, the church reallocated some ministry time and effort toward meeting their needs. Office Administrator Dawn Driedger was the first person those from the reserve met at the church. Dawn learned their names and family connections and prayed with them. She also started visiting the Tsuut’ina reserve to deepen the relationships. “As a congregation we affirmed that Dawn was pastoring these people,” says Lane. Today, Dawn is the Administrator and Community Pastor.

Before the pandemic, the team discovered that food insecurity is a big

issue. Oak Park volunteers distributed food and were a welcoming presence to Indigenous people. As the need for food increased during the pandemic, word spread, and more people from the reserve came to the Oak Park Pantry or received quarterly food hampers. **“We received a federal grant for the Food Bank because of the work we had already done,”** says Lane. They also partnered with a Costco on the reserve to rescue almost-expired food to hand out. “God opened doors as we were faithful.” The church continues to provide free food weekly.

*“God opened doors as we were faithful.”*

**Another value of the Oak Park team is transparency. Lane says this contrasts with the superstar pastor culture** in some mega-churches where ugly secrets can remain hidden. “Part of what draws people to any faith community is whether the people are authentic. There is transparency at [Oak Park], and people in the community see that,” says Associate Pastor Alvin Ram. The staff team maintains professional boundaries, but is comfortable sharing struggles, praying for each other, and socializing as friends. While younger generations appreciate this transparency, sometimes it makes older members uncomfortable.

**Lane admits there are tensions leading a multigenerational church.**

Used to more formality at church, seniors can get “ruffled” by kids running around after the service, pretending to preach and jumping off the stage. Meanwhile, young parents appreciate the casual freedom. Despite the challenges, none of the staff want a young adult-only church. “Everyone on staff loves to spend time with our seniors, values their wisdom and honours them,” says Lane. Worship & Arts Pastor Shelley Potts chooses songs meaningful to every generation, from kids songs to hymns, and everything in between.

Lane and Alvin revealed the extent of their love by performing a skit in silly

Continued next page...

Carolyn Stone, member of 1401, a missional church in Hamilton, ON

# Doing Life With Neighbours

When four families were wondering what God wanted them to do in their Hamilton, ON neighbourhood, they noticed lonely people, broken marriages, and isolated families. The core group began to meet weekly to eat and pray; they saw each other at their kids' school and around the neighbourhood. Gradually, they included curious friends. Their missional church, called 1401, has grown to 15 families and meets on Sunday nights for dinner, worship and prayer.

*"We do life together and we're like a family."*

**"I love meeting new people. These individuals are not who I would normally connect with, but God has a way of bringing people who are different together,"** says Carolyn Stone

(pictured), a nurse and mom of three.

"We do life together and we're like a family." Lonely people are finding hope with this

family of Jesus followers. A man whose sister was dying brought her to the group to be prayed for. They supported both of them as the woman passed way from cancer. "We deeply love each other." ■

...continued from page 2

costumes at a Christmas lunch for 120 church and community seniors. "We live into the tension and sort of celebrate and poke fun at it," says Lane.

**The team reflected on their hope for their local church and the broader body of Christ.** Alvin desires less fear to try new things. "If something is not working, let's change it." He also wants church life to be more relational and less program-driven. To this end, Alvin has been expanding the number of life groups at the church. Sara

believes community members glimpse God's kingdom when churches collaborate. "Hope for Life Church meets in our building. We've partnered with them on some events and it's been great." Lane agrees, "If we don't collaborate with other churches, we're disobedient to God's call."

Their mission is not about Oak Park Church surviving. "We are faithful to the kingdom of God. If God wants this local church to die, we'll be faithful to the end and start a new congregation or join another—because God is still at work." ■



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# Thinking Shrewdly 2023

A Fresh Imagination – A VMC conference for young church leaders, April 28-30

## All Have a Part to Play in Indigenous Reconciliation



Ben Peltz, ministers to students and Indigenous people

“The impact of colonialism is real. Indigenous people in Canada have an inherited disadvantage. They carry the scars of this deeply entrenched issue,” says Ben Peltz, VMC Campus & First Nations Ministry Leader. “We have benefitted from taking their land, consuming their resources, and using them as soldiers.” Ben says that in colonial times, many Christians used social pressure and manipulation to coerce Indigenous people into discipleship. Going forward he urges Christians in Canada to build relationships first and to redeem culture, not eliminate it. “Don’t treat Indigenous people like a project.” Ben also recognizes that many Indigenous people were raised as Christians, a legacy of earlier evangelism by Pentecostals and evangelicals, and many others. “God may use Indigenous people to re-evangelize Canada.”

## Housing & Hospitality

“It’s easy to distance ourselves from hurting people,” says Jeff Neven, CEO of Indwell, a Christian organization that builds affordable housing with a range of supports. Many who rent Indwell units live with disabilities and mental health and addiction challenges.

Jeff pointed out the injustice of proposed Bill 97 in Ontario. The Helping Homebuyers,

Protecting Tenants Act defines a right to “attainable” not “affordable” housing, which leaves people with disabilities out. He showed a shocking chart documenting the meteoric rise of rents contrasted with flat Ontario Disability Support Payments (ODSP). A single person in Ontario receives just \$522 to pay for shelter, which might not even cover a room. “As



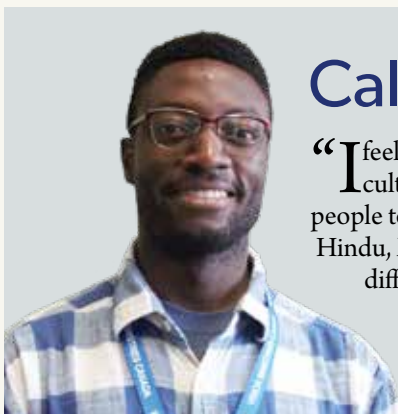
Jeff Neven, CEO of Indwell

Christians we need to call out this injustice.”

Jeff shared a story about

the transformative power of providing homes. In one small city, Indwell housed and supported the 15 hardest to house individuals. With their needs taken care of, calls to police in the area went down by 85%! Policing and health care costs are reduced when communities invest in housing. “We all have a part to play in reducing homelessness. Build a tiny home on your property [and rent it out]. Share your backyard. Share the BBQ. Share a meal. Share Jesus,” says Jeff.

[www.indwell.ca](http://www.indwell.ca)



## Called to Reconciliation

“I feel called to reconciliation among people of different cultures, religions, and backgrounds. We need to lead people to Jesus by showing them our lives. I go camping with a Hindu, Muslim, and Jew. Sometimes they ask me, “We are so different; why do you love me?”

*Tolu Adewumi, Attends Mosaic Church in London, Ontario and works in business.*

# Lament, Hope & Challenge For The Church

“The church is way behind on conversations about racial and sexual identity. If the church doesn’t engage in these conversations, young adults will go elsewhere. I am lamenting that,” said Katy Der, Varsity Bible Church, Calgary, AB.

“Jesus offers us more than church attendance and knowing about the Bible. Are we helping people flourish in all

areas of their lives?” Alvin Ram, Oak Park Church of Christ, Calgary, AB.

“The watching world will know us by the way we do family as a church,” said Dan Gillis, from Port Kells Church, Surrey, BC. He added, “We need to radically embody the way of Jesus. And we need a move of God... Every move of God starts with prayer.”



Panelists: Katy Der, Alvin Ram, and Dan Gillis



## Longing for Mentors

Several panelists and participants touched on the need for mentors. “Discipleship is asking questions, seeing where someone is at and doing life together,” said Jackson O’Brien.

“When I was younger, I met with a guy for 45 minutes per month and did a retreat once per year for 10 years. I didn’t need a volume of time, I needed consistency. I saw a lot of fruit from this relationship,” said Ryan Carruthers. He counsels young adults to approach mentors by saying, “I like how you live. I want to learn from your character.” Several agreed that watching godly people



and working with them had a positive affect. “Being a disciple is less intellectual than we make it. Disciples followed Jesus and did whatever he did,” said Dan Gillis. Meaghan Mechler agreed, “People don’t need information, that’s available on the internet. They need to know how to make sense of information.”



*Among us are countless shiny things.  
Distractions overwhelm us.  
Father, we feel the weakness of our imaginations.  
But where we are weak, you are strong.  
Here at our walls,  
open for us windows of fresh vision.*

Sara Robinson guided the group in a time of reflection as they prayed through a liturgical prayer she wrote.

## Discipleship Starts with Leaders

Amanda Van Haltren, lead pastor of St. Clair Community Church retold the story of Peter denying Christ three times. “When push comes to shove, we might capitulate like Peter did,” says Amanda. She reminded 60 young leaders gathered at the Thinking Shrewdly conference that according to Jesus we can expect to experience persecution, anguish and affliction. “We live by a different kingdom manifesto so what we do will bump against the culture around us.”

To prepare for “trouble in this world” Amanda said leaders should be training disciples for growth not comfort. She quoted a Navy SEALs mantra, “In a moment of crisis we do not rise to the occasion, we will default to our training.”

Amanda says the training starts with leaders and that churches will only be as healthy and mature as their leaders. She encouraged attendees to pursue “radical personal holiness” because they can’t lead people where they haven’t been. Jesus points out “the parts of ourselves that are undisciplined and out of shalom with him.” He wants us to be completely at peace (shalom) with him. “Trust that as we surrender to the scalpel of the Spirit, we will become the leaders who take



Amanda Van Haltren,  
Lead Pastor, St. Clair  
Community Church

the next right step.”

After his resurrection, Jesus graciously restored Peter, by asking him three times, “Do you love me?” When he said, “Yes I love you,” Jesus commanded “Feed my sheep.” Amanda says, “We are to feed Jesus’ sheep out of a deep place of being loved and forgiven.”

## Don’t Stop Praying and Loving



Doug Loveday,  
VMC Pastor to Pastors

During the final Thinking Shrewdly panel, Doug Loveday shared a riveting story of he and his wife Ruth patiently loving their foster son. He lived with them as a teen when Doug was teaching in Labrador City. After 40 years of prayer and connecting on and off, Doug and Ruth often struggled with hope.

Today, Jesus is transforming their foster son through the Mosaic church family in London, ON. “Just last year, he gave up alcohol and even quit smoking,” says Doug. “Don’t stop praying for or loving people struggling with difficult life situations. We thank God and the church and are very proud of our foster son.”

## Making Church a Place Young People Don’t Want to Leave

BY NILS & MICHELLE REUTER

I don’t know what to do. I want to follow Jesus, but I just don’t fit. I’ve tried church, but I’ve never felt accepted,” a high school student told me as tears streamed down her face.

Conversations like these break my heart. This young woman, raised in a Christian home, was eager to know and submit to Jesus, but viewed the church as an obstacle to her faith. Unfortunately, in my work with teenagers and young adults, conversations like these are too common.

While the problem is not new—every generation of Christians faces challenges transitioning from childhood to adulthood—today’s young people are leaving the church in droves. *Hemorrhaging Faith*, a foundational report by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada states, “Only half of Canadian children raised in evangelical churches continue to attend church regularly as adults.”

As Christian leaders, what can we do about this alarming exodus?

### 1. Demonstrate Lavish Grace

*“God might love and forgive me, but Christians won’t if they knew what I’ve done.”*

Teens often believe that while Christ will forgive their sins, those they share a pew with will be less generous. According to *Hemorrhaging Faith*, many youth experienced ridicule for poor behavior, instead of the lavish grace extended by Jesus. While we try to protect teens from the repercussions of moral failures, they hear judgement. Our hesitation to extend grace and accept brokenness causes young people to abandon their faith. “Emerging adults are looking to be part of a congregation that will accept people as they are and love them relentlessly,” reports *Hemorrhaging Faith*.

As parents and church leaders, we need to balance teaching young people about

right-living while leading them into relationship with their Saviour. We must ensure they encounter Jesus, before we address wandering behaviours .

## 2. Open and Honest Dialogue

*“My parents go to church, but they abused me. Why would a loving God let that happen?”*

*“My friend is gay? Is he going to hell?”*

These are just a few of the questions teenagers asked last summer when I spoke at a high school camp. Once I said, “I don’t know,” the questions kept pouring in as students wrestled with doubts and fears. The more I walked alongside high schoolers, the more I realized they weren’t searching for answers. They wanted acceptance and compassion from someone willing to empathize with their doubts. “It’s not doubt that is toxic to faith—it’s silence,” writes Dr. Kara Powell, in *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager*.

## Only half of Canadian children raised in evangelical churches continue to attend church regularly as adults.

Our instinct is to respond defensively, but research shows questions should be encouraged. “Teenagers with doubts who felt the freedom and had the opportunity to express their questions actually showed greater faith maturity,” writes Powell. When young people have a supportive space to explore their beliefs, they are far more likely to continue to pursue the Christian life.



Michelle & Nils Reuter are raising 3 members of the next generation.

## 3. Flip the Ratio

Most church youth groups operate with a 5:1 ratio — five teenagers for every leader. In her book *Sticky Faith*, Dr. Powell ponders what would happen if we flipped this ratio and each young person had five mentors connecting with them?

Teenagers report that their “relationship with people in the congregation was far more instrumental to their spiritual growth than the sermons,” (*Hemorrhaging Faith*). Mentoring needs to happen in addition to regular youth group programs, not as a substitute. As church leaders, we need to challenge mature Christians to

intentionally invest in the lives and faith of younger Christians.

### There is Hope

While our ministry models need to change, there is still hope for the next generation of Canadian Christians. *Hemorrhaging Faith* states, “When it comes to the ethos of the church, young people long to be part of a faith community that is multi-generational, authentic and inclusive.” ■

### Recommended Resources

1. *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why & When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying & Returning to the Church*, Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).
2. *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections*, Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin.
3. *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*, Clark and Kara Powell.
4. *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations*, Search institute.



Young adult leaders at the Thinking Shrewdly Conference.

# Step Aside But Don't Disappear

BY MIKE STONE

With another birthday passing, middle age is mostly in the review mirror. I'm not ancient, but the vigour and enthusiasm of my 20s are MIA. Like me, you might wonder what making a meaningful difference looks like in the years to come.

Quoting the prophet Joel on the day of Pentecost, Peter assures us, "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." In Joel's day, prophesy, visions and dreams were the domain of older, male religious types. With the outpouring of God's Spirit, Peter proclaimed divine revelation is available to all, regardless of gender, class or AGE.

Sure, there's consolation if you feel your best years are, but more astounding is the news that God works through young adults.

The early luminaries of the Plymouth Brethren, VMC's spiritual tradition, were quite young when they inspired this movement. Craik, Cronin, Muller and Darby were in their twenties, and the old guys—Bellet and Groves—were barely in their thirties. Thirty seems so young to me now, even though I stepped into my first lead pastor role at age 31.

Why are established church leaders hesitant to engage young adults as leaders? Do we suspect their inexperience will cause irreparable damage? Could it be our dissonance with their methods and values?



VMC Executive Director Mike Stone praying for Nat Evans, Lead Pastor at ForestView Church, Oakville, ON.

*"There is a season for deciding, designing, directing, and doing, but then its time to decrease so young leaders might increase."*

We may resist passing the baton because we fear displacement and a diminished sense of purpose.

The Old Testament seems to limit Levitical service in the Tabernacle to those aged about 25-50. However, meaningful service continued beyond 50; "They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the tent of meeting, but they themselves must not do the work." (Num. 8:26). "Retirees" were encouraged to support younger leaders.

According to a recent study, our sixties represent our most influential decade. Having journeyed longer and further, we are well-equipped to support those who are mid-course or just beginning. We can guide, encourage, promote, pray, defend, secure resources, share wisdom, create opportunities, and lend a hand. We can companion in adversity, failure, sorrow, and doubt; and celebrate success. We still have so much to offer in our later decades!

As parents, Sharon and I provided our preschoolers with firm direction and boundaries. In elementary school we added moral reasoning and greater flexibility. Parenting looked more like coaching as our teens made more of their own decisions. Eventually our children graduated from

uni, married, and one is raising children.

These days, parenting is mostly about hugs and encouragement.

Occasionally we share wisdom, though only when solicited.

What if the arc of our influence reflected the phases of parenthood?

There is a season for deciding, designing, directing, and doing, but then its time to decrease so young leaders might increase. Can we step aside but remain present in a supportive and life-giving way?

Ultimately, we don't entrust the church to young leaders; we entrust young leaders to the Spirit. Whether it's our dreams, visions, prophetic insights, or those of the emerging generation, it is the same Spirit who inspires and illuminates. ■

## THINKING AHEAD



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