



THINKING AHEAD

FALL 2023

VMC's Role in Catalyzing Kingdom Creations

BY SANDRA REIMER

Vision Ministries Canada staff have walked with many visionary Christian leaders in the last 30 plus years. Below are three leaders' reflections on how VMC supported them to follow the call to build God's kingdom.

FaithTech: Empowered to Seize the Moment



"VMC played a HUGE role in getting FaithTech off the ground," says founder James Kelly. In October 2015, James was working for a recruiting firm. At the same time, he and his wife were living missionally in their Waterloo Region neighbourhood. James noticed a disconnect between "people in ministry working on issues that tech could help solve and Christians in tech struggling to find their place in the church." James says, "FaithTech brings the two groups together." At their first event in April 2016,

35 ministry leaders, tech creators and tech visionaries gathered at a coffee shop. "It was electrifying as we considered the possibilities of combining faith and technology." James met with VMC's Mike Stone about this emerging ministry. "FaithTech didn't fit into any ministry boxes, but Mike was super willing to help us figure things out."

The world was ready for FaithTech as people attended Waterloo, ON gatherings and other cities requested events. James thought, "This is moving fast!" Already the father of one, James wondered how he would fund FaithTech. He knew forming his own charity would take too long. "VMC was able to move quickly to help me." James quit his steady job in October 2016 to focus on FaithTech full-time. VMC provided the charitable umbrella, financial management, and receipting that allowed James to seize the opportunity God put before him. VMC also made introductions and helped James meet people who could open more doors. "It's possible FaithTech wouldn't have happened without VMC. SUCH a gift!"

Today, FaithTech is a "global tech community for Jesus Christ" that helps "people in the tech ecosystem find community and steward their skills to

glorify God." FaithTech is active in 35 cities in 12 countries including Canada, the US, Brazil, Europe, and Asia. They are launching new local groups in Beirut and Cairo. See faithtech.com

Farsi Christian Ministries: Kingdom First

In 2005, Siamak Shafti-Keramat responded to God's call to start a Farsi-speaking church in Toronto. Siamak wasn't a trained pastor but he obeyed God. Siamak, his wife Mina, their son and one other woman began meeting together in a church that hosted the ministry. In the beginning, the pastor of the host church preached to the group and Siamak translated.

That Easter, the fledgling group invited all the Iranians they knew to an Easter

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How to Scout New Kingdom Stuff

BY JAY GURNETT

At Vision Ministries Canada (VMC) we love that we are a network. This fits well with our core value of being **Relational**, which is partly derived from the value **Jesus-Centered**. We love our people—because he loves them even more.

But our founding, perhaps more primal values are **Missional** and **Pioneering***. VMC began 31+ years ago, because Gord Martin and friends felt God wanted them to help plant churches and start new outreach initiatives. We are part of the Mission of God who is growing his kingdom and we're willing to take risks alongside folks who are settling into new kingdom land. We can't ever seem to shake this and we don't want to.

But that doesn't mean it just happens. The kingdom of God may be forcefully advancing – but sometimes it's hard to see where the wind of the Spirit of God is blowing.

Some evidence that supports this:

1. Only about one in three conversations we begin with possible church planters, result in working together to start something
2. Only 20% of the new works we've come alongside didn't reach sustainability (though we're told the "industry standard" is 50% of church plants don't survive)

We've been privileged to be a small, helpful catalyst to some real dreamers, like the leaders behind MoveIn, FaithTech, Jesus Network and Farsi Christian Ministries (see page 1), but those are rare.

So how do we find the new things God wants us to be alongside?

It's helpful to use pioneering as a metaphor. I might have it wrong, confused by old western movies, but it seems to me that there were always folks going ahead of

explorers and pioneers: scouts.

The way we've bumped into 150+ church plants over the years was by looking everywhere, going around every corner, reading all the signs. We learned how to scout.

Practically, this meant:

- Developing and nurturing relationships and networks
- Always listening for the language of the Spirit's leading
- Attending to any sign of holy discontentment
- Talking about God-inspired new initiatives and telling the stories of how it happens.

When you're scouting for new stuff, talking to everyone you can about what they're thinking about church and God and people, you discover the wind of the Spirit is blowing all over the place all the time. Often just a tiny whispering of the

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wind (though that was just what was needed by Elijah).

There are little green shoots (teeny tiny ones) that just need a little watering. In his masterpiece, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, great missiologist Lesslie Newbigin talked about living in "alert faithfulness".

What I've been talking about is "alertness". It might be something you have to cultivate, but with a bit of intention, it comes.

In addition to being alert, you have to be **faithful** in following where the wind is blowing. Once you hear someone wondering about doing something fresh (a green shoot!) – you have to pour some water on it.

Vision Ministries version of faithfulness:

- We call back
- We Zoom into the life of the possible planter
- We talk and pray and visit and dream some together

Eventually, we walk through our **Vision to Reality** discernment process. If by the end of a whole bunch more thinking and praying and writing and conversation, we feel like we have a good common understanding of what God has for us to do, then we commit to go forward together.

And then our systems kick in – more ways for us to be faithful. The biggest support is in several kinds of coaching: spiritual life, strategic, peer, spouse. We can provide funding. We can provide a full banking/bookkeeping/insurance/incorporation/etc. system that lets a community get going before it has any legal status. And more.

But all in all, Missional Pioneering, starts with Relational connecting, just like it did with Jesus.

Imagining something new?
Contact Jay Gurnett to chat about it.
jay@vision-ministries.ca. ■

*Learn more about our values at www.vision-ministries.org/about/vision-mission



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God is Doing a New Old Thing

Port Kells Church in Surrey, BC had dwindled to about 35 or 40 faithful members. But they weren't ready to give up on their 135-year-old mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. So they asked pastors Ben Hilson and Dan Gillis to replant the church.

On re-launch Sunday, the co-pastors encouraged the congregation, "It is our turn to take the message of Jesus to our generation. It is our turn to stand in the gap and contend for a move of God in our day. It is our turn to pray, "Revive us, and we will call on your name" (Psalm 80:18).

Though a few of the original members left, most have stayed and been joined by new people. "We've seen a large influx of people coming back to church—people who slowly fizzled out of church just before or during COVID." A year after the relaunch the church has grown to attendance of about 100 people—including many young families. Recently,



Pastor Dan Gillis with his wife Laurelle, and Pastor Ben Hilson with his wife Nicole.

a woman told Dan, "We haven't had a newborn in the church for 11 years." Dan adds, "Now the church is full of babies."

"In most churches, people feel like it

doesn't matter if they show up on Sunday because their gifts won't be needed, except to greet a few people or serve coffee," says Dan. Port Kells emphasizes people discovering their Holy-Spirit given gifts and using them. "This is the same emphasis Port Kells had when it started in 1888," says Dan. "They believed in equipping and empowering leaders and disciples—including women."

The congregation is adopting a "way of life" that helps them become more like Jesus. Their regular practices include scripture reading and memorization, sabbath, generosity, loving their neighbours, eating together, and using their spiritual gifts. Dan says many attending Port Kells are "hungry for real community. They want intimacy, not just proximity." To create intimacy, Port Kells invites people to join communities that meet weekly to share communion and a meal. About 65% of attendees belong to these mid-week communities.

One Port Kells' council member said she appreciates that Dan and Ben are "raising the spiritual temperature" of the church. Ben says, "We are calling people to a higher level of commitment when it comes to following Jesus." ■

God Calls Through VMC Connections

"We were doing a prayer and worship night around the corner from Port Kells Church," says Pastor Ben Hilson. "Our group was emerging into a church, and we were looking for a larger space." Ben was thinking about reaching out to Port Kells about using their space. Independently, VMC's Matt Pamplin was prompted by the Holy Spirit to reach out to Ben, his former Wycliffe College student.

Matt introduced Ben to VMC and encouraged him to pray about church planting. When Ben found a job posting for a lead pastor at Port Kells on the VMC website, he suggested talking to them about revitalization. They said yes to a replant and hired Ben (and Dan Gillis) in 2022. "The Holy Spirit was at work," says Ben. In just over a year, Port Kells has grown from 35 or 40 members to more than 100.

Lingering with The Lord: Sabbatical Reflections



BY MIKE STONE

This summer, I received the gift of a three-month sabbatical from VMC's Board of Directors. The practice of offering pastors an extended leave for rest and re-creation has become more common in evangelical circles in recent decades. Sabbaticals are rooted in the practice of Sabbath-keeping. A Sabbath rhythm includes six days of work and one day of refraining from work to re-direct our thoughts, affections, and actions toward God.



Mike's sabbath fence project

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "On the Sabbath we specifically care for the need of eternity planted in our own soul." Theologian John Calvin, the founder of the Protestant Work Ethic said: "On the Sabbath we cease our work so God can... work in us." Author Marva Dawn says, "When we cease from all our labors to control or to understand, there is time in our space for the eternal."

My understanding of sabbath and sabbatical was deepened through Marva's writings. About fifteen years ago, our staff team at Forestview Church discussed her book, *The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those Who Serve God, the Church, and the World*. I will reflect on my sabbatical experience, using Marva's four essentials for Sabbath-keeping.

Ceasing—from work, productivity, accomplishment, worry, control and trying to be God. It took longer than anticipated to clear my inbox, delegate responsibilities, and plan the calendar for my return in the fall. I was just being conscientious, right? Or was it an unhealthy attachment to frenetic

activity, a sense of worth that is rooted in what I produce, or reluctance to trust God's provision in my absence? When we cease from work on the sabbath, we demonstrate our confidence in God's grace for our well-being, not just that day, but also for the six days that we work.

Resting—of the body as well as the mind, emotions, and spirit—a holistic rest. In creation, each day begins with night and follows with morning. Rest is our starting point. Our efforts spring from God's grace, not the reverse. I was almost halfway into the sabbatical before I felt rested. Soon, I was sleeping longer in the morning. Beautiful Bruce Trail hikes had a calming (healing?) effect on me. Running and resistance training boosted energy reserves. Online Spanish lessons stimulated my aging brain and a backyard fence project engaged under-utilized creativity. God used mid-day naps, moderate re-creation, and a break from typical work pressures as green pastures and the still waters to refresh me.

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YOU ARE WHAT YOU LOVE



How James K.A. Smith is Helping Christians Rethink Faithfulness

BY NEAL DEROO

I was sitting in a coffee shop in Edmonton (ironically, reading an email from VMC's Jay Gurnett), when I overheard two guys in their early 20s at a neighbouring table. "Yeah, he talks about how malls are like the new temples, and how they enact a kind of liturgy that shapes our hearts and what we worship. That's what he's driving at with his idea of 'you are what you love.' You gotta be careful about what your life is shaping you to love, because it's probably not God." The "he" in question was James K.A. Smith.

Smith (Jamie to those who know him) is an award-winning author and public speaker and the leading Christian public philosopher in North America. He is precisely the kind of person that you'd expect young Christians to discuss in coffee shops. Smith has been instrumental in helping people think of new (old) ways to live faithfully to Christ.

Smith's work challenges the idea that being a Christian is primarily about what we think or believe. Instead, he engages with thinkers from Augustine to Derrida to show us that, even deeper than what we believe, Christianity is about shaping what we desire. It's a matter of the heart. And the heart is shaped, not primarily by sermons, but by everyday practices repeated habitually.

He points out something our

culture has known for a long time: what we want shapes who we are. That's why advertisers don't try to change your mind through lists of pros and cons or reasoned arguments. They give you a glimpse of something to desire. You are what you love, as one of Smith's book titles puts it.

Smith calls us back from the superficial allures offered by our contemporary world. Instead, he invites us to a deeply-held love for God, rooted in practices and habits drawn from the long tradition of Christian spiritual formation.

As a philosophy professor, part-time preacher and sometime teacher of Christian teachers, I have experienced how Smith and his ideas help people come to grips with the world they face. Our society doesn't care if we believe in God, as long as we love the "good life" promised by the Canadian dream. Simultaneously challenging our minds and providing salve for our hearts, Smith shows us how to counter these cultural liturgies and instead shape our hearts to love God most of all. ■

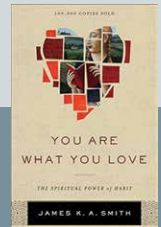
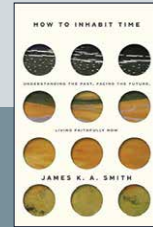
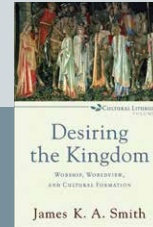


Dr. Neal DeRoo is Professor of Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies, and a teaching elder at Ministik Community Church.

Hear James K.A. Smith at Thinking Shrewdly 2024

KEY BOOKS

By James K.A. Smith



The three books comprising Smith's "Cultural Liturgies" Trilogy, show us how contemporary culture is forming us to want a version of "the good life" that is inconsistent with the kingdom of God. To counter this formation, we need to realize we are more than "brains on a stick". We are lovers, deeply driven by what we want. This shift has a huge impact on how we think of Christian education and discipleship formation.

You are what you Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit

Given the importance of our desires for how we live, it is important for Christians to know how our hearts are shaped. In this work Smith makes clear that it is habit (not theology) that shapes us most deeply, and so worship becomes the "imagination station" shaping our hearts and lives toward God rather than toward an idol.

How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now

Smith shows how spirituality is timely. It requires paying attention to history, being oriented toward the future, but living always in the "now". As Christians wrestle with the sins of our past and try to figure out what the Christian faith will look like in the future, Smith encourages us, not to abandon history and its vicissitudes. Instead, he exhorts us to be intentional in how we inhabit time.

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...continued from cover

celebration. 150 curious Iranian-born Muslims showed up! “Most did not come back, but a few did,” says Siamak.

Seeing that God was at work, the host pastor asked Siamak to get a degree at his denomination’s seminary. “He wanted me to follow the rules of their denomination.” But Siamak was uncomfortable with some of their doctrines. He needed a new partner. One night in 2007, he reached out to “anyone and everyone” leading a Christian ministry in North America. Someone from a Southern Baptist church in the US put Siamak in touch with VMC’s Gord Martin.

As Gord connected Siamak to financial resources and to other Christian leaders, he did not try to align the Farsi church with a denomination. “VMC puts Christ and God’s kingdom first,” says Siamak.

In 2009, Siamak completed his MDiv and began pastoring The Spirit of Truth Church full-time. This was thanks in part to financial support from the 12:12 Network, a collaborative partnership among VMC, the Associated Gospel Churches of Canada, and the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.

With help from VMC, Siamak also

started Farsi Christian Ministries (FCM)—a global network of Christian leaders ministering to Persian people. FCM is an important bridge between Farsi-speakers who understand the Persian culture and North American ministry leaders who want to reach them. “It’s all about relationships,” says Siamak. See www.stctoronto.com

MoveIn: Meaningful Connections



“Building relationships is one of our core values,” says Nigel Paul, founder of MoveIn. “MoveIners know the names of about 20,000 people in high-needs communities the Lord has asked us to move in to.” This February, MoveIn will celebrate 15 years of God’s faithfulness.

Nigel says, “I think back to 2009 when God was giving me the vision for MoveIn. VMC was there to help in so many significant ways.” VMC’s Gord Martin helped Nigel with ministry governance,

practical guidance, and meaningful connections. At a prayer and support group for VMC-connected leaders in Toronto, Nigel got to know, love, and learn from Pastor Siamak and Pastor Yonatan Hiruy who ministers to Eritreans and Ethiopians. “Pastor Yonatan is still on the MoveIn board, and he officiated at my wedding,” says Nigel.

Today there are almost 400 MoveIners on 85 teams in 45 cities and 16 countries across North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Southeast Asia. MoveIners befriend people going through hard times, host Bible studies, share meals, and help neighbours with immigration papers. In some communities they help kids pay school fees, provide breakfast, mentor teenagers, run after school programs, and summer camps. “We praise God so many people have come to Christ from countries like Iran, Czech Republic, Israel, and Japan.”

See movein.global

Every member of the VMC network who has prayed, encouraged, mentored, and financially supported collective Kingdom building ventures is an important part of these successes! ■



Mike and Sharon Stone overlooking Granada, Spain on their sabbatical.

Sabbath Reflections ... from page 5

Embracing—deliberately taking hold of Christian values, of our calling in life, and of the wholeness God offers us. Sabbaticals are not intended for avoidance and escape but for encounter and embrace. Since my early thirties, I have enjoyed quiet times with God more mornings than not. However, there have been seasons in which reading and prayer have been hampered by hurry and distraction. Sabbaticals invite leisurely lingering with the Lord. In this sacred space, I heard a renewed sense of calling—to rest and then return; to anticipate expansion, lean on others and prepare those who will follow. Some of what I heard was difficult, including an exhortation to address life-long insecurities. But there was also assurance that God will continue to sing his song over me, completing the work he began in me.

Feasting—celebrating God and his goodness in individual and corporate worship as well as feasting with beauty, music, food, affection, and social interaction. Dawn sees the Sabbath as “a weekly eschatological party,” a delighting

in the present in anticipation of the eternal joy that is to come. Sabbaticals, then, are extended celebrations in which we feast on God’s present gifts as signs of the world to come. There were beach days with the grandkids, unrushed walks with Sharon and warm conversations with aging parents. I kayaked the Grand with a friend and went fly-fishing on the Bow with my son. We hosted a nephew’s wedding rehearsal dinner on our back deck and officiated his wedding the following day.

The sabbatical culminated with time in southern Spain, where reminders of God’s goodness were ubiquitous: morning quiet times with views of the Mediterranean, the Sierra Nevadas glowing under Andalusian sunsets, and architectural hints that Muslims, Jews, and Christians once lived in relative peace. We enjoyed laughter, strolls and outdoor dinners with family and friends; and the opportunity to bless and be blessed with words of love, affirmation, and appreciation.

Marva Dawn reminds us that Sabbath is not primarily intended to fill our reserves before we return to work; it is an end in itself. It foreshadows our eternal rest, joy, and worship in heaven. Sabbath is not preparation for real life. It is life. ■

Sabbath Tips

Whether you rest one day per week or a months-long sabbath here are some helpful tips from Marva Dawn author of *The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those Who Serve God, the Church, and the World*.

Cease from work, productivity, accomplishment, worry, control and trying to be God.

Rest the body as well as the mind, emotions, spirit—take a holistic rest.

Embrace your calling in life and the wholeness God offers. Linger with the Lord as you take unhurried time to read, pray and worship.

Feast on beauty, music, food, affection and social interaction and celebrate God’s goodness as you worship alone and with others.

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