

Neighbourhood-focused Mission: Planting Churches With Communities



THINKING AHEAD

SPRING 2024 The Newsletter of Vision Ministries Canada

BY JOE WHITE

I believe church planting is the only form of church renewal strong enough to heal the four historically dominate narratives that hinder Jesus' great commission. These four fragmenting stories include:

1. Moving away from neighbourhood-focused mission,
2. An emphasis on "getting people saved",
3. Planting homogenous churches, and
4. Relying on tech to foster community.

The first trend emerged around the time of Constantine in the 4th century when Christian churches moved away from localized neighbourhood-focused mission. The second came about in the 15th century. With the emergence of early globalization, churches focused on "getting people saved" without a strong emphasis on biblically defined discipleship. Since the 20th century, US and Canadian churches have tended to plant churches according to homogeneous church-growth principles and business models without developing a strong mission to the neighbourhoods where these churches are located.

And now in the 21st century, our technology age, technocrats (those who think technology can solve societal problems) are enticing churches to use A.I. and virtual reality to create Christian community.

I think these faulty narratives are only healed when men and women filled with the Holy Spirit plant churches. But not all churches are worth planting if they replicate the trends that got us here. Recent Canadian stats show that the majority of churches in Canada today have either plateaued or are declining. More than 300 close their doors for the last time every year.



Joe and Heidi White,
VMC church planters
in Fresno, California

According to Robert Linthicum, founder of Partners in Urban Transformation, churches tend to be planted in three forms:

- 1 **A church in its community.** While they are physically located in a neighbourhood, they often fixate on their own existence and largely ignore the needs of the neighbours around the church.
- 2 **A church to its community.** They provide resources to the neighbourhood they are physically located in, but view themselves as the saviour of the community.
- 3 **A church with its community.** This is the only type of church that leads to the rapid acceleration of the great commission. The church joins with neighbours to address issues in the local neighbourhood, and see themselves as part of the neighbourhood's struggle and the primary disciple-making partner in its renewal.

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More churches on mission and more people following Jesus.

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Canada welcomes immigrants, especially refugees. You don't get that in other countries.

Contending for Hearts and Souls in Canada

BY SANDRA REIMER

“Two things happened to me recently that caught my attention,” says Mingpeng Gong, head of the Chinese Church Association of VMC. “Last fall I visited old friends in New York City. They arranged a tour for us of the Google headquarters.” As Mingpeng and his wife Tianmei and son walked through these offices that represent the pinnacle of North American success, they saw stations serving food from around the world and places to play games. “People could even bring their pet dogs to work.” Tech companies try to make their workplaces so attractive that employees don’t want to leave!

The second thing that Mingpeng noticed happened at a Raptors game at the Scotia Centre in Toronto (friends gave him and his wife front-row tickets). “There was so much excitement!” After these experiences, Mingpeng asked himself, “Why would anyone want to go to church? They have better things to do besides sit through boredom in the church. They have exciting moments to watch, good things to eat and drink.” The sharp contrast between pleasures of the world and church stood out to Mingpeng.

Culture competes for hearts

Mingpeng sees our culture’s competition for people’s hearts and souls in his work among Chinese Canadians and

international students from China. One of the CCA churches builds relationships on the York University campus as they serve a weekly meal to 30 or 40 students. “Ten years ago people used to be more open to the gospel. Now international students come with more money and more sense of entitlement.”

Bold witness

Yet Mingpeng and other Chinese Christian leaders continue to be faithful. “In the last three years, CCA helped plant four churches.” Last fall a Chinese church was planted in North York. “We appreciate VMC’s help, including early funding of church plants and that they can receive tax receiptable donations [from their members] under VMC’s charitable status.” Members of CCA churches also do mission work around the world, including in South Africa and Peru, where Chinese people have settled. Mingpeng also regularly goes back to China to share the gospel.

Mingpeng says one thing immigrant Christian leaders can offer established Canadian Christians is their boldness in witness. “Canadians are polite. It happens so often they can be nice to someone for years and never mention the name of Jesus.”

Every Friday, Mingpeng gathers with other VMC-connected immigrant pastors who are reaching out to their people in Canada. Yonatan Hiruy reaches Eritreans

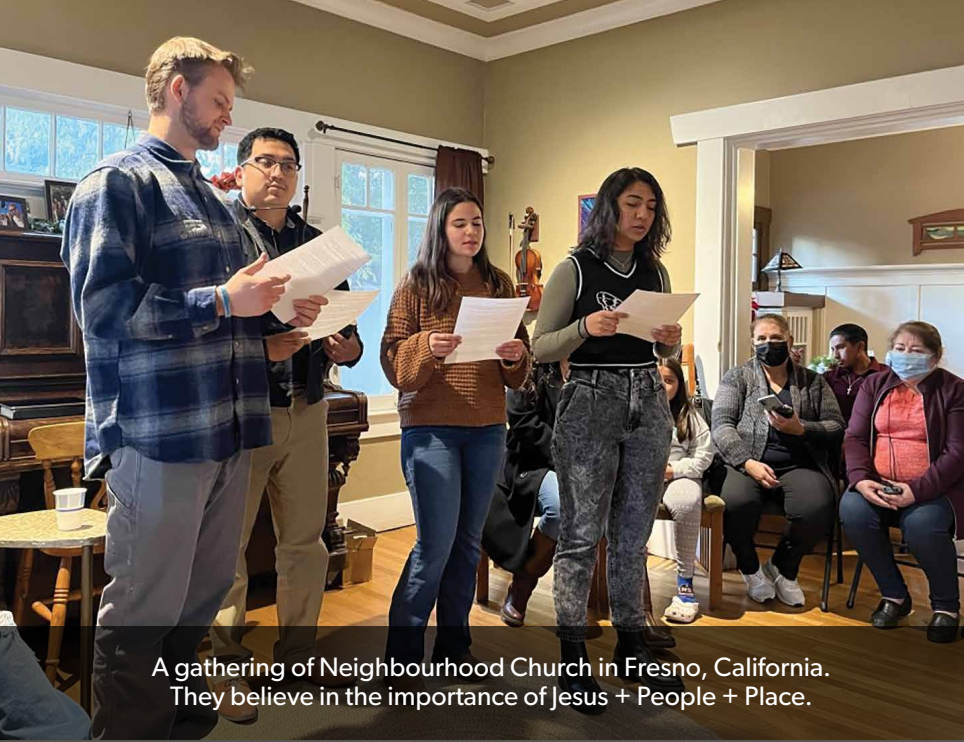
and Ethiopians, and Siamak Shafti-Keramat works among Persian speakers. They pray for support each other in the challenges and victories of ministry. “Siamak is seeing Iranians come to faith through visions and miracles.” Mingpeng adds, “We also thank God for many healings we have experienced in our churches.” He says, “That’s what we pray for, a demonstration of God’s power. People will be drawn to the Lord when they see his power. It can only be done by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise we will lose.”

Concerned for the next generation

Mingpeng and diaspora Christian leaders are deeply concerned for the next generation—their own children and other Canadian youth. Youth are being swept away by the culture and not engaging in church. One of the most significant challenges for new immigrants to Canada is the more liberal cultural values taught in public schools—especially on gender issues. Many come from cultures where parents tend to be authoritarian. Mingpeng says that belonging to a culture that excludes parents from making some decisions about their children is disturbing. “We feel like we have no say.”

Mingpeng remains grateful for Canada. “Canada welcomes immigrants, especially refugees. You don’t get that in other countries.” He also appreciates belonging to VMC. “We all feel one in Christ.”

As he talks about reaching the youth and young adults for Christ, Mingpeng speaks urgently and passionately: “We could do more together [immigrants and established Canadians], especially with next-generation ministry.” He adds, “We need to keep doing what we are commanded and wait on the Lord of the harvest.” ■



A gathering of Neighbourhood Church in Fresno, California. They believe in the importance of Jesus + People + Place.

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Nine years ago, our local church, Granville Chapel in Vancouver, BC sent my Canadian family as VMC church planters to Fresno, California in the Jackson Neighbourhood. We have attempted to plant a church with our neighbours. Our church further extends VMC's call to raise up and send Canadian church planters to establish more churches on mission, and more people following Jesus who will pursue virtue, justice, and the reconciliation of all things.

The Jackson Neighbourhood is 8 blocks by 12 blocks and 923 homes representing 3,300 residents. We see our neighbourhood as a geographical area of spiritual responsibility: whether the issues are spiritual, economic, educational, environmental, political, or relational, we pursue Jesus' vision for our neighbourhood and its residents. Metric after metric shows that Jackson is vulnerable and under-resourced. But that's not its final story! Jesus believes in underdogs! With our neighbours we started a business that employs residents with barriers to employment; we started a non-profit organization that runs a dozen programs like in-class

support for underperforming elementary students; and we also started 2 weekly gatherings of neighbours dedicated to being disciples of Jesus and following His mission. We are three things working together for the flourishing of the Jackson Neighbourhood - a church, small business, and non-profit all working in coordination for Jackson's shalom.

We think the Church needs to get entangled with the neighbourhoods it's located in. We think church should feel like a family because it actually is a family. We think that the church is the incarnate faithful presence of Jesus and we're called to demonstrate the gospel by loving our neighbours as a church with our community. Our micro-church expression has become 100 neighbours meeting in two homes and we are ready for a third gathering in another home. It's led predominantly by people using their spiritual gifts who are aligned together towards a specific vision and mission for Jackson.

Church planting is what happens when church renewal and neighbourhood renewal coalesce - and it's the only thing strong enough to uphold Jesus' great commission. ■



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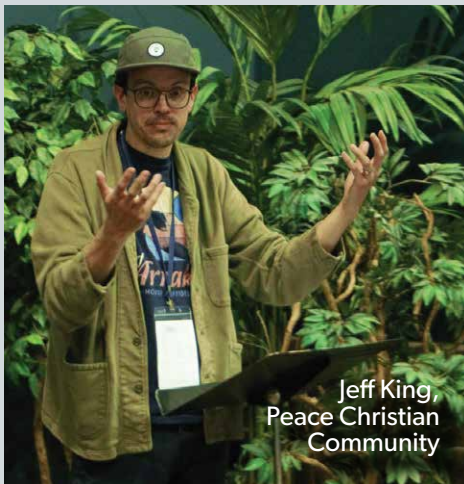
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Thinking Shrewdly 2024: Together

For the first time, Vision Ministries Canada collaborated with the Institute of Christian Studies. Our parallel conferences included shared meals, workshops, and a keynote and follow-up interview with author and Christian philosopher James K.A. Smith. Both conferences included discussion about “getting beyond polarization.” ICS students, faculty and guests come from a variety of denominational backgrounds. VMC attendees were Christian leaders from our network. VMC workshop presenter Jeff King, said, “Attempting this thing together was also accomplishing it [getting beyond polarization].”

Listening, Learning, & Serving Together in Polarizing Times



“Maybe unity looks less like agreement than proximity,” said workshop leader Jeff King. Jeff is a leadership team member at Peace Christian Community in Edmonton.

When faced with people we disagree with, Jeff says, “The goal is to understand the shape

of the space between you and me.”

Jeff recommended:

- Actively listening, to make it clear you actually want to know
- Discovering: Who is this person? Who are their people? Where are they coming from?
- Steel-manning” your opponent’s arguments so you are almost convinced by them, instead of “straw-manning” their viewpoint to make them as weak as possible.

Jeff pointed to Matthew 8 when the Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant. “Jesus saw beyond the Roman centurion’s identity as a perpetrator of violence to a man asking God for healing for his servant.”

Participants shared stories of finding common ground with people different from them. Hospital chaplain, Jessica Baker, said “I am a Brethren chaplain caring for patients alongside an Anglican priest and a



pagan priest.”

Bringing some nuance, Quebec pastor Jean-Sebastien Lemelin said “Sometimes we think being tolerant is not to have convictions. I think this is because the meaning of tolerance has shifted to mean every idea is equal.” He advocates maintaining our convictions while accepting others with different beliefs.

Jeff added, “When we are together, the lack of agreement is not the main thing. Through proximity and service, we find a shorter route to love than agreement.”

Guy Bourassa’s Quebec Crew

When pastor Guy Bourassa (top left) started the Le Groupe Réseau des Assemblées Chrétiennes Évangéliques in 2006 not many churches wanted to join a network of French evangelical churches. Now 25 churches belong and work together on planting churches in Quebec. Guy brought 7 leaders from his network to Thinking Shrewdly. He says, “The long drive is a good chance to get to know each other.” This shared experience deepens their unity and desire to collaborate.



Welcome New VMC Partner Church

Elder chair Elizabeth Carlson and pastor Sandeep Jadhav from New Life Community Church in Burnaby, BC. New Life joined the VMC Network in April. Sandeep spent some years at University Chapel in Vancouver and thought of VMC when New Life was looking for a new place to belong after parting ways with their denomination. "I feel like we moved into a network that fits how we function as a church."



Cultivating a New Generation of Leaders



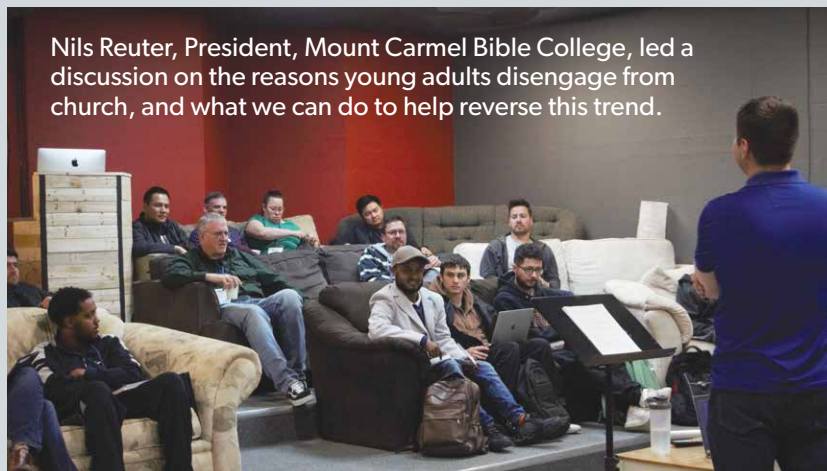
VMC staffer, Matt Pamplin gathers weekly with young adult leaders for 6 months in Next Gen Leader Cohorts. "I see a blend of boldness and humility that gives me hope for the future. Young leaders are asking questions and adopting ancient practices."

3 Things Older Leaders Should UNLearn

- Valuing pragmatism over mystery
- Valuing heroic activity
- Valuing classrooms and platforms over meals and conversations

3 Things Older Leaders Can Learn

- Presence over programs
- Smaller (fermenting) communities led by older, wise mentors
- Listening to the pain of our communities with compassion



Nils Reuter, President, Mount Carmel Bible College, led a discussion on the reasons young adults disengage from church, and what we can do to help reverse this trend.

What young leaders have to say to older leaders:

"We don't want to fill a position and duties. Identify people and build a role around them."

– John De Los Santos (Toronto China Bible Church)

"Get to know young adults—you don't have to understand. There is so much room for older leaders to share wisdom."

– Katie Greenway-Short (Mt. Carmel Bible College)

"Young leaders want to know they are more valuable than the program."

– Jon Mason (James North Hamilton)



Martin Luther University College students Eshika (L) and Gurshan (R), came to a shared VMC/ICS workshop about Gen Z because they were curious about evangelical Christians. From Hindu and Sikh backgrounds, faith is important to them and they want to discuss it.

Recognizing Ourselves as Beloved by God



Thoughts from James K.A. Smith

BY SANDRA REIMER

On the final day of the Thinking Shrewdly conference, Neil DeRoo, Professor of Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies, interviewed James K.A. Smith about his previous night's keynote address. James spoke on *The Mystic Crucible of Un-Knowing: From Culture Wars to Contemplative Spirituality*.

Raised in Embro, Ontario, James is now a professor of philosophy at Calvin University in Michigan. "Someone pays me to think all day," says James. The author of more than a dozen deeply thought-provoking books, James advocates building on a foundation of thinking to find God in personal encounters.

James nodded with approval as Neil summarized his talk:

Stop trying to relate to God by thinking so much. Focus instead on being loved by God because only by recognizing ourselves as beloved will we be free to see others as also beloved.

"Getting to the place of seeing ourselves as beloved by God is the liberation from our anxieties and fears. I am less anxious when I know I'm loved by a God who will never leave me or forsake me," said James.

"The problem is our modern way of knowing. We have developed habits of mind where we think knowing is comprehending and mastering." Based on his reading and practicing lessons from Christian mystic Teresa of Avila, James says, "There is a way of being aware of God's love that transcends conceptual frameworks and doctrinal delineation." He adds, "Mystery is not a

problem to be solved but a plentitude to swim in."

Teresa of Avila writes that an experience with God drills a well you can drink from for the rest of your life. James says, "I experienced the arid desert that the mystics describe. And I remember when I received the assurance that I am loved by God. I keep coming back to it."

James recommends reading contemplative writings by Meister Eckhardt and Teresa of Avila, including her transformational book *Interior Castles*. He also suggests "building our stillness muscles" and experimenting with modes of prayer that are receptive rather than expressive. He says that sometimes, as evangelicals, we think we need to generate things to say to God. "Learn to pray the Psalms and receive the gift of spirituality without doing anything." ■



Our Shared Participation in the Life of God

BY MIKE STONE

Together... that was the name of this year's iteration of Thinking Shrewdly, VMC's national conference. Since 2018, this event has been convened regionally, held online, focused exclusively on the young, or cancelled due to Covid. So, when we gathered at Lincoln Road Chapel in April, it was the first time VMC leaders of all ages had been together in six years.

Getting VMC pastors, evangelists, elders, and church planters in the same room is no small feat. Canada is the second largest country in the world, stretching five and a half time zones and covering almost ten million square kilometres. Whether French Quebec, Cascadia, or the Prairies, regional concerns and priorities exacerbate the lack of proximity.

To add to the challenge, Canadians are as ethnically diverse as they are

geographically. In 1971, Canada became the first country to adopt a national multicultural policy. Our country has received more than a million permanent and non-permanent new residents in each of the last two years, mainly from Asia and Africa. Visible minorities now account for more than half the population in two of Canada's three largest cities, and nearly 40% in the other city. Meaningful "togetherness" requires the ability to navigate language and cultural differences.

Vision Ministries has been shaped by a global movement known as the Christian (Plymouth) Brethren. While we continue to live out the most generative values of this heritage, churches from other traditions or no tradition have been grafted in over the last three decades.

Avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach, we encourage contextually sensitive

ecclesiology that is responsive to the Spirit's initiative (*missio Dei*). The resulting diversity of style, form and methodology provides rich learning but also generates contentious debate.

In an era of polarization, "togetherness" has become increasingly elusive. Many Canadians watched the 2016 US election. Shocked by a country divided and scandalized by circus-like politics, most smugly expressed relief that they live north of the border. Then, in January 2022, the Freedom Convoy in Ottawa revealed our own lack of civility and a propensity to square off against each other. Powerful people bully and the powerless cancel their detractors. Vitriolic attacks and character assassination are among our weapons. Mostly, we just stop talking with each other.

Given all the obstacles that could keep us apart, it was genuinely good to be TOGETHER at Thinking Shrewdly in Waterloo. New friendships were formed, and old friends picked up where they left off. The opening session was punctuated with light-hearted laughter, enthusiastic singing and wonder-filled "oohs" and "aahs" after hearing stories of mission and impact. These church leaders were excited to be in the same room with each other and the joy was palpable!

Our conference was an occasion to be

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Diaspora Leaders & Mission



Diaspora leaders, who gathered at the Thinking Shrewdly conference, expressed deep concern for the next generation—their children.

Musu Taylor-Lewis (pictured above in yellow print) belongs to an African fellowship that meets at People's church in Toronto, she is also the president of Food for the Hungry

Canada. She says, "Single mothers are coming to Canada with their children. Their boys are turning to Islam because that is who is reaching out to them and they want male mentors. The mothers' hearts are broken."

Pastor Meron Woldehawariat (green jacket above) leading Eritreans and Ethiopians in Calgary, said, "We really want to raise

Christian kids." Born in Eritrea and married to an Ethiopian, Meron says they are "raising a Christian child, not an Eritrean child, not a Canadian child."

Meron asks, "How can we integrate with Canadian churches so when our kids grow up they have an (English-speaking) choice for church?" ■

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together physically and an opportunity to promote new strategic togetherness. In several main sessions, we invited pastors and ministry leaders to coalesce around three VMC priorities:

- a) Continue to lead with church planting
- b) Partner with diaspora leaders to leverage the kingdom potential of human migration
- c) Prepare and commission next-generation leaders for emerging missional contexts

We believe this three-fold strategy, along with VMC's values and faith statement, defines the common ground on which we can partner as a network. Our values define a culture that is missional, relational, pioneering and Jesus-centered. Our faith statement stands in continuity with the ancient creeds, aligns with the World Evangelical Alliance statement of faith and shares the evangelistic concern of the Lausanne Covenant.

Ultimately, only shared participation in the life of God creates unity. He is the one who reveals himself as Father, Son and Spirit, the eternal dance of mutual love and

self-surrender—pure relationality in which none of three is subsumed by the other, yet they are perfectly one. Only in his being can we truly be together.

Deeper participation in Trinitarian life will increase our capacity to listen, share and learn without being easily offended. It will allow us to sit at the table with those with whom we differ. It will enable us to see our sister as one who is seeking Truth as much as we are, and one whom Truth is seeking as much as it is seeking us.

In the age to come we will experience this fully; for now we give and receive grace... Together. ■

THINKING AHEAD



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