



Vision's Ministry of Coming Alongside

THINKING AHEAD

Fall 2024 The Newsletter of Vision Ministries Canada

BY JAY GURNETT

Vision Ministries Canada came together with the simple focus of planting new churches. But, we ended up doing other work that reflects the nature of God—the work of coming alongside. We learned quickly that to be part of establishing more churches, we also had to be involved with flourishing, effective, better churches. Because, of course, healthy churches provide the raw materials for church planting: active disciples, richly mentored planters/leaders, funding, etc.

That meant we had to be truly “with” churches we knew, providing perspective, advice, training, and resources from just outside the walls of the local church. There were people “moving amongst” the earliest churches (and ever since), who came alongside. Perhaps the primary benefit is what the apostle Paul (in 1 Cor 6) says: “even the least wise amongst you” can bring the wisdom of distance or objectivity to an issue.

So, this edition of Thinking Ahead focuses on all sorts of things we lump under consulting. To help churches in our network, VMC responds to Asks, connects churches to Transitional Leaders, and helps churches that are Stuck or in Crisis.

Asks

Perhaps the most time-consuming of our “alongsiding” is a stream of emails, texts, and ...calls seeking the answer to one small question, a desired connection, or a needed resource. Though these itsy-bitsy Asks are relatively minor consulting, they can lead to 4-5 hours of advising, or connecting with a “specialist” consultant. These little helps are also glue that create a healthy network that gets more done than we can do individually.

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Transitional Leadership

Keith Shields is one of our key partners in coming alongside a church after a major leadership change (a long-term pastor departs, or there's a bit of a mess to clean up). Keith describes Transitional Leadership in an article on page 2. It's easy to think that you have what it takes when there's a major shift. Often a church does. But we know dozens of churches that testify that a good transitional leader made a huge difference. (See testimonies page 5).

Getting Unstuck

Sometimes leader teams/elders and their communities get Stuck. This happens in our individual Spirit-filled lives, so of course it happens in sub-groups of the One Body led by the One Spirit. Vision's front-line staff and a wide group of volunteers and paid consultants might spend a weekend (plus advance work and follow-up) helping a leadership team seek God's direction on a primary focus, vision/mission/values, some particular complexity they're confronted with, or just how to get moving. Or a VMC person might walk alongside a church for a year or more e-mailing, Zooming, talking, visiting, writing, suggesting, etc. Gord Martin's article on page 7 talks more about VMC helping with Stuck and Crisis.

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Transitional Pastoral Leadership in Canada

BY KEITH SHIELDS

I began my training with the Transitional Leadership Network (TLN) in 2018 when I was Interim Lead Pastor of a Calgary church. I had been Executive Pastor beside a great Lead Pastor who shepherded for 41 years—21 as Lead Pastor and 20 as Associate. After almost 50 years of continuity, the shift of his retirement would be a shock to the congregation. The church was healthy but needed a transitional period to determine next steps. To serve them well, I sought additional training to strengthen my skills.

Through TLN training, I realized transitional leaders are more than interim leaders holding a place until a new Lead Pastor is hired. Being a Transitional Pastor is challenging because you must do everything a Lead Pastor does (preaching, administration, pastoral care, evangelism, etc.) and guide the church through a transitional process. This process starts with engaging the congregation in prayer

and includes assessments regarding closure and healing from the past. It also includes clarifying vision and preparing for the search process, while attending to congregational care, organizational health, preaching and services, and keeping the church on mission.

Next, the congregation forms a transition team that identifies what needs renovation before hiring a new pastor and areas in which a pastor could lead the congregation into greater health. This helps the church identify who they are and what they're seeking in a pastor. It also gets more members involved and invested in hiring a new leader.

When the congregation is ready, the Transitional Pastor helps the search team post the job, interview and hire. Sometimes the transitional leader coaches the new pastor. As the spiritual leader, the Transitional Pastor challenges the congregation to bathe the process in prayer,

The transitional process slows down a church's mechanisms so they can take time to hear God. This requires the church to trust God will speak through the transitional team.

take steps of healing and repentance, and continue spiritual practises that reinforce relying on God.

My first transitional role was highly positive for the congregation, their leaders, and the new Lead Pastor. I recognized that although I made mistakes, God used me to serve his purposes and that he might be calling me to serve other churches. The mix of spiritual gifts and years of experience that God granted me were valuable to congregations needing this kind of help. Later, I served churches in London, ON, Winnipeg, MB, and Simcoe, ON. Each ministry had unique challenges and took about a year to facilitate. All reminded me of the importance of this ministry.

Many congregations, boards, elders, and

church leaders are ill-equipped for transitional work. It's tempting to quickly hire a new pastor without truly considering the type of leader needed given a church's makeup. A quick hire may be a bad fit. Pastors exploring roles are drawn to churches that invest in finding the right leader by discovering who they are and what they need in a pastor. The transitional process slows down a church's mechanisms so they can take time to hear God. This requires the church to trust God will speak through the transitional team.

We need leaders who can step into churches in transition with a process that offers hope to a congregation that has lost some

momentum and vision. The reasons for a Lead Pastor's departure may be positive or devastating. Transitional leaders are called into many different circumstances and with appropriate training, and the grace of God, can lead a congregation toward the next phase of life. It is important for denominations, networks, and conferences of churches to have transitional leaders ready and equipped because the need is often unexpected and immediate. I pray that churches within Vision Ministries and beyond will continue to embrace this model of transitional leadership for the sake of healthy congregations across Canada.

About The Transitional Leadership Network (TLN)

TLN is a network of about 40 trained transitional leaders across Canada. TLN offers basic and advanced training. TLN also provides pastors with experience as Transitional Pastors with a process to be credentialled with a denomination or network of churches as further recognition of their calling. (www.transitionalleadership.org) ■

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Crisis

There are times in the life of many local churches when people realize they are in Crisis. Some New Testament epistles deal with quite severe problems (almost all the letters show some kind of consulting happening). We're human beings, with various perspectives on scripture, relationships and issues – who are called to be one as our Lord and his Father are One! It would be much easier to opt for "Us and Them" like the culture around us. When one of those matters boils over, it can sure help to have someone who will "judge angels" come into the mix. That is often folks from Vision (who may also be "of little account in the church").

We're talking about coming alongside because we want to

continue to do so. Part of the deal of being in the Vision Ministries partnering network is having us available to help. We do most of this work without charge – though we appreciate having our costs covered. If a consult starts to take many hours, we're glad to have that recognized with a financial gift or fee.

Though it's certainly not about the money. Remember that even for partner churches, half of the general income we receive is held in trust for new church planting. Consulting is just one of the ways we expect to be serving the God of all coming alongside – the God of all comfort (for churches!).

Need help? Contact us at info@vision-ministries.org to inquire about consulting. ■



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VMC Resources for Coming Alongside Churches

VMC staff and other trusted people are available to consult with churches in our network.

The process:

A representative of the church leadership group contacts VMC to explore the possibilities

- VMC staff make a proposal for the elders/ leadership team to consider

- If the elders/leadership team are unanimous in their desire for a consultation with VMC staff or others referred by VMC, then arrangements and expectations are agreed upon
- Congregations are invited to give an honorarium and cover travel costs

Contact us at info@vision-ministries.org to inquire about consulting

Some of our consultants: Jay Gurnett, Gord Martin, Mike Stone, Don Crawford, Jon Dart, Doug Loveday, Keith Shields, Mark Anderson, Petra Anderson, Sandra Osborne, Margaret Paul, Sean Jackson, Charlene Kane, Matt Pamplin, Paul Williams, Rinus Janson, Ming-Peng Gong.

What do you need help with?

How we help

Direction and purpose	Discern direction, clarify purpose and cast fresh vision. Focus leadership, revise governance structure.
Transitional Leadership	Guide transition from previous era to a new one, when a senior leader leaves. Enhance congregation's spiritual, relational, structural and strategic health.
Crisis Intervention	Companion the congregation to facilitate trust in God. Mediate conversations. Help congregation stabilize, deepen unity, identify issues, and devise a plan.
Spiritual Life Coaching	Coach leaders to overcome barriers that diminish competency, capacity and impact. Combines life coaching and spiritual direction.
HR Consulting	Guide development of HR policies and practices that align with Canadian employment law and compensate and care for employees fairly. Advise and possibly intervene when HR crises emerge.
Finance, Management, Charitable Status	Advise churches and coach leaders on best practices related to people management, organizational process and general administration. Support churches in their application to incorporate and attain charitable status with CRA.
Church Planting and Evangelism	Ignite fresh passion for sharing the good news, multiplying disciples, and planting new churches. Identify practices and strategies that will contextualize evangelistic endeavours for secular and pluralistic Canada.
Conflict Resolution	Address conflict by identifying the issues, getting key people "to the table", and mediating discussion until participants arrive at a mutually satisfying agreement.
Diaspora Ministry	Guide churches to practice hospitality to Canadian newcomers, partner with immigrant leaders to develop newcomer ministries, and create a home for immigrant sub-congregations within the life of majority culture congregations.

How God Works When VMC Comes Alongside

VMC Consulting Was Like Advice from a Wise, Caring Friend

By 2019, Westview Bible Church—a 500 person church in Montreal, was united in prayer and anticipation for the future. There were many vibrant ministries, reflecting the congregation’s multi-ethnic and multi-socioeconomic diversity. It was clear that God was doing something wonderful, but the question remained: what would be our next steps? Our Elder team invited VMC to advise us. Through interviews, a church-wide survey, and leadership team analysis, the VMC team gently and expertly helped us identify our strengths and areas for growth. They also pointed out some significant gaps and needs within the church, which wasn’t always easy to hear. However, Mike and his team had taken the time to truly know us and listen, so their evaluation was received like advice from a trusted, wise friend who deeply cared for us. Having VMC consult with your church is a gift. It’s an opportunity to seek God’s will with the skilled guidance and support of those committed to walking alongside you.

Rebecca Stymiest, Elder, Westview Bible Church (Montreal)

We Saw the Lord Move

As we exited the pandemic, and some other challenges, the Board of Elders felt we needed outside guidance to clarify our church community’s purpose and vision. [VMC’s] Mike Stone got to know the Board and understand our desired outcomes. Over two engaging weekends, Mike got to know our community, and led us through engaging and lively discussions about God’s unique call for our church. Following each session, Mike provided insightful reports on what he observed. Our leadership team still talks about his observations. We saw the Lord move. God brought about deeper connections in the church, increased unity, and a strong sense of vision and purpose.

Wesley Moore, Pine Grove Bible Church, Ottawa, ON

Congregation is Thriving

When our founding pastor retired after 24 years, VMC stepped in to help us through this significant change, providing a transitional pastor who was the perfect fit for our congregation. This brought much-needed stability during a time of uncertainty. Mike Stone’s wisdom and guidance through phone calls, Zoom meetings, and in-person visits, made a big difference. VMC’s commitment to our church has been a true blessing, providing both spiritual and leadership guidance when we needed it most. Now our congregation is thriving.

Thanga and Christina Nohro,
Wasaga Community Church Pastoral Team, Wasaga Beach, ON

Structure to Support Our Vision and Mission

In 2024, St. Clair Community Church hit an important 10-year milestone as a former church plant—we now have 200+ attendees. While we operated with a loose organizational structure, it became apparent that we needed to discern a structure to support our future vision and mission in a sustainable way. VMC’s Mike Stone graciously guided the St. Clair Leadership Team with deep expertise. He conducted Appreciative Inquiry interviews with members of our community, and walked us through several research-based frameworks for governance, structure and organization. We were encouraged to hear Mike identify St. Clair’s strengths, including the value we place on prayer and discernment, people and relationships, and team and shared leadership. [This process] has positioned St. Clair well to navigate the stages of organizational development, and to grow into the church Jesus is calling us to be.

Brian Harvey - St. Clair Community Church, Hamilton, ON

Refreshed Mission, Vision, and Values

We knew the value of having someone outside our community facilitate a conversation that had a lot of history and potential baggage. [Working with a VMC consultant] allowed all of our leaders to be engaged in the process and conversation as partners. Jay Gurnett facilitated a conversation and brainstorming day that began our journey. He also provided advice in subsequent weeks and months. [The result] was a fully refreshed Mission, Vision, and Values statement that reflects who we are and where we believe God is leading us.

Lane Scruggs, Pastor, Oak Park Church, Calgary, AB

Transitioned to a Thriving Church with a Future

Port Kells Church leaders recognized we needed to make significant changes to our leadership and structure to thrive in coming decades. VMC connected us with two next-generation pastoral leaders, provided us with crucial funding, plus mentoring and support. As a result, we successfully made the transition from a declining church community of seniors to a thriving family church with a future. VMC had access to the right resources, relationships and knowledge that were invaluable.

Bob Cottrill, Former Pastor, Port Kells Church, Port Kells, BC

VMC Helped Us Think Down New Paths

We were (are) exploring new ways to be church in this time. [Meeting with a VMC consultant] helped generate and clarify some ideas, particularly around micro-churches. [Through the process] we envisioned a joint partnership in hiring a young man into an outreach pastor role. [The VMC consultant] asked good questions and helped us think down new pathways. It was fantastic!!

Rinus Janson, Varsity Bible Church, Calgary, AB



Problems in Your Church? Not a Surprise!

BY GORD MARTIN



For as long as I can remember, I've heard about the glories of the New Testament Church. We imagine believers full of the Holy Spirit living in loving harmony

and sharing everything in common! But all the New Testament letters were written because there were problems in the churches. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" Jn 16:33.

Don't be surprised or ashamed that you have trouble in your church. Every church goes through seasons of difficulty. Sometimes the most flourishing-looking churches have deeply hidden conflicts that lead to a "sudden" explosion. Admitting we have problems may be the first step forward. Keeping it all under wraps is not helpful. I am a great believer in the possibilities of problem solving because we all have Jesus on our side, "who has become for us wisdom from God" I Cor 1:30.

When churches request help, I ask myself:

1. Does the person asking represent a wholesome element of the church?
2. What are the surface problems and underlying causes?
3. "Lord, are my gifting, experiences, and training a good fit for this situation?"
4. What relational credit do I have with this group?
5. How can I get a solid invitation from the right people? Are mature and respected people in agreement about seeking external assistance? Are the leaders together about inviting me? It's a promising start when an invitation is from a viable core of leaders and "influential" people.

After being invited to consult with a church, we discuss and establish expectations.

1. What do we expect of each other and how long will we work together?
2. How will we make and implement courageous decisions from this process?
3. What will it cost in time, energy, prayer, and money? A fruitful church is worth it!

After creating and agreeing on a plan, I facilitate a dialogue with leaders to explore and search for agreement on their church purpose(s).

Clarifying the Essentials:

1. Can we clarify our primary Biblical purpose(s) and agree on why we exist?
2. God helping us, how will we accomplish our big, faith-requiring purposes?
3. How will we communicate them to the congregation?

We also discuss secondary issues that are often killing a church:

- How will our leaders and leadership structures facilitate achieving our purposes? What adjustments are needed?
- Do we have the right people in the right places? How will we make the necessary changes?
- How will our leadership groups learn to function as teams? How will they make and enact decisions? What will they do when they disagree?

Don't be surprised or ashamed that you have trouble in your church. Every church goes through seasons of difficulty.

When congregations agree on the big questions, they often discover the unifying beauty described in Acts 15:28 which says, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." And the unity mentioned in Ps 133:1, "How good and how pleasant"!

An experienced outsider, like a VMC consultant, can be a great help because they're not part of the problem, and they have no stake in the outcome. They bring hope, fresh perspective, and direction. There is nothing like seeing a group of leaders at peace, who feel confident in God's guidance and equipped to make important decisions!

Gord Martin is the founder of Vision Ministries Canada. He continues to volunteer with VMC. ■



What's Re-forming and Invigorating Evangelicalism?

BY MIKE STONE
Executive Director, VMC

In his book, *Streams of Living Water*, Richard Foster names seven spiritual traditions that have shaped Christian faith over the centuries, including Evangelicalism. Most denominations primarily identify with one, maybe two of these traditions.

Evangelicalism has shaped the majority of VMC churches. It is our heritage—the spiritual water we swim in. In his 1989 study, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, David Bebbington identified four hallmark themes of the movement: Bible, Cross, Conversion, and Activism. Though these four remain indispensable to our tradition, the essence and inner mechanics of each are more widely debated among contemporary Evangelicals.

Foster points out that his seven streams of spiritual life have, at times, been “cut off

from the rest of the Christian community, depriving us all of a balanced vision of life and faith.” He goes on to say that God is drawing isolated streams together, which like the Mississippi River, “gains strength and volume as the Ohio and the Missouri and many other rivers flow into it.” In our day, “God is bringing together a mighty Mississippi of the Spirit.”

As a new generation takes the helm in our churches, Evangelicalism continues to morph internally* and it is being enhanced by the influence of two other traditions: the Contemplative and Charismatic.

The Contemplative tradition is attentive to the interior life, emphasizing ancient formative practices that nurture the soul. The Charismatic tradition prioritizes the dynamism of the Spirit for personal transformation and mission. Both have profoundly influenced the shape of Evangelicalism in recent decades.

A disproportional emphasis on ‘doing’

(Activism) and ‘knowing’ (Bible) can unintentionally lead to soul neglect. In recent years, Evangelicals have watched numerous non-stop, highly-educated leaders burnout or implode. Recognizing that the “emperor has no clothes”, Evangelicals are craving deep vitality and congruence between their inner life and public reputation.

As the Christian faith contracts and the Church’s footprint shrinks in the West, Evangelicals are increasingly disillusioned with the focus on strat-plans, big budgets, CEO-style leadership and a “can do” work ethic. This decades-old ministry approach isn’t thwarting secularism or religious pluralism. Having a form of godliness but lacking its power, evangelicals look longingly to their Pentecostal counterparts and the more charismatic Church of the global south. There is a fresh desire to experience the Spirit palpably and witness his efficacy

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There are days I pine for the Evangelicalism of my youth, when I was blissfully unaware of how isolated it was from other streams of vitality and of the mystery that permeates the Cross, Bible, Conversion and Activism of my tradition.

— Mike Stone, Executive Director, VMC

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in mission—to “wait for the gift the Father promised” and move only when God moves.

At first glance, contemplatives and charismatics might seem polar opposites—the first quiet and pensive, the second extroverted and enthusiastic. Both, however, are concerned with the Holy Spirit. Contemplatives seek to discern his subtle whisper and invite his renewing presence, while Charismatics desire his dynamism, personally and for missional impact.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is my go-to tool when consulting with churches. Borrowed from the social sciences, it is a form of questioning that emphasizes the positive and generative aspects of congregational life and mission. Increasingly, I pose questions that help participants attend to the Spirit:

What aspect(s) of church have been most life-giving for you recently? It could be a program, practice, person or something else. Answers often point to Spirit-empowered elements of church life.

Do you sense that the Spirit has been doing a fresh work in the life of the church? If so, what are the signs of his presence? What kind of work is he doing—comforting, convicting, enlightening, guiding, reviving?

Has the Spirit been speaking to you about the church lately? Has he given you a word, image, scripture or dream? It might first be a word for you, but it could also be for the church. What is he saying to you?

Where do you see God’s active presence in the church’s missional context? That is, in this vicinity and the neighbourhoods and networks associated with this congregation? How might He be inviting the church to participate with Him?

The latest iteration of Evangelicalism is what we need for our time, for it has been refined by internal scrutiny* and enhanced by the influence of two other great spiritual traditions.

**Read my blog post on the internal shifts of Evangelicalism. Leave a comment to continue to dialogue. <https://vision-ministries.org/blog/internal-shifts-of-evangelicalism/> ■*

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