



Consoling People Into the Kingdom

THINKING AHEAD

FALL 2025

The Newsletter of Vision Ministries Canada

Evangelism in the Age of Despair

BY SANDRA REIMER

Christian author and professor, Andrew (Andy) Root, believes that as late modern people have made happiness their highest aim, they've become deeply sad. The last few decades have been filled with anxiety and depression at a time when people are feeling more isolated than ever. Most people have no one to console them when they experience suffering.

Andy will be the keynote speaker at VMC's Thinking Shrewdly Conference, taking place in April 2026 in Toronto, Ontario.

In his latest book, *Evangelism in an Age of Despair*, Andy talks about the importance of consoling our neighbours, embracing their humanity, and participating with them in sorrow. Andy reframes evangelism as consolation because he says that's

where we meet God. "This is the theology of the Cross...where God shouldn't be found is where God is found." He adds, "What evangelism ultimately becomes is asking people in companionship with the community to lean into their suffering, not in a kind of masochistic Norwegian thrash metal kind of way, but in a way that says, we believe you'll find something there."

Andy contrasts "leaning into suffering" with a therapy culture that tries to help you fix problems, hack challenges, and escape suffering. "What a theology of consolation says is there's no solution to your problems...you are a creature who needs the justifying and loving work of God." He suggests helping people to accept, "You are a creature who is broken and sad and will have to say goodbye to many people and many things...But in the midst of that pain...you find that Jesus Christ is present there."

Learn more by listening to Andy's podcast, *Ministry in a Secular Age*, or reading his books.

Visit andrewroot.org

*Quotes from *Ministry in a Secular Age* Podcast Episode S1E55 "Evangelism Isn't Wellness—Evangelism in an Age of Despair"

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Men at Westlock Bible Chapel in Westlock, AB studying God's Word Together. In recent years, the church has grown significantly as young men search for Christ.

Growing In The Lord Profile: **WESTLOCK CHAPEL**

BY SANDRA REIMER

Three years ago, on a Friday morning during their weekly prayer time, Ken Stange and John Grant, Pastoral Elders of Westlock Gospel Chapel, were challenged to let the Lord have control of their lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. John shares that Jesus stated several times in the Gospel of John, "He only did what he saw His Father doing, and we should be sensitive to God's leading us in the same way."

It wasn't long after this prayer that John experienced a series of health problems. He had to step back from his work at the church, including heading up their Awana program, which involved 140 children and 35 to 40 volunteers. "It was hard to step back. I love kids."

Faced with declining health, John and his wife, Sandra, made the difficult decision to sell their 15-acre hobby farm and buy a house in Westlock, a small town north of Edmonton. But in 2022, as John was feeling better, he and Sandra sought the Lord about how He wanted them to be involved. "We prayed specifically for direction for about a week, and on Saturday we got an answer."

A young man who had started attending the church with his wife and baby asked

John to do a Bible study with him. When he and John finished studying Mark, God sent the next person and the next. In the years since, John and other leaders conducted Bible or book studies with many young men and couples. Three of them soon became believers in Jesus Christ, and three couples were baptized. Many others have joined those initial new followers in the years since. And of course, John is just one example of how God has been leading when a person says yes to the Lord.

The overseer's group at the Chapel decided to start a weekly group Bible study for men. Through these weekly meetings, they study and apply the Sermon on the Mount. When

the leader invited men to try preparing a lesson, several of the new believers volunteered to teach. And they dug deep, learned well, and continue to learn from one another.

This reliance on the Lord through the Spirit of God by the leadership team has resulted in significant growth, both in numbers and maturity (particularly among the young men), through evangelism. In this 5,000-person town north of Edmonton, the church has grown to an attendance of about 250, and it's only one of many churches in the area. At the same time, the Chapel has become increasingly ethnically diverse.

John says that Westlock leaders wanting to be led by the Lord and His word, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, echoes the desires of early Christian Brethren leaders; "That's our deep deep roots." The Westlock believers recognize the Holy Spirit is shaping lives and families. All glory goes to God! ■



"Greatness" in Canadian Congregations: What about church growth?

Based on a 2024 research study with 31 Canadian Christian pastoral leaders, Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research, Wycliffe College - University of Toronto

Presenter: Elizabeth Millar, VMC Storyteller
Friday, November 28, 2pm EST via Zoom (60 min)

To register or for more information: elizabeth.millar@vision-ministries.org

About the Vision Ministries Canada Advisory Council



Jay Gurnett, VMC Associate Director (L) in conversation.

BY JAY GURNETT

Vision Ministries Canada has gathered church leaders together at various times since before we formally constituted the organization.

But in 2012, we asked leaders of a dozen to twenty thriving churches from across the country to come together as an official Advisory Council. Initially, we assembled them to “move the mission forward” – i.e., to commit to providing significant funding for church planting projects brought to the group by the council members.

As the group has grown and undergone changes, this remains

a primary focus. So two to three times/year (once in person), primary leaders/lead pastors of these churches gather with VMC frontline leaders to:

1. Fellowship and pray for one another
2. Ponder an issue or two together (leaders advise Vision on issues)
3. Consider and make decisions about funding church plants

The togetherness has been rich – we’ve become friends. Advisory Council Members have shared a wealth of wisdom (VMC is grateful!), and approximately 40% of all church plants that Vision has been alongside were initiated and funded through this vital partnership. ■



More churches on mission and more people following Jesus.

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Thinking Ahead is published 2 times per year in an effort to connect like-minded Christians and their local churches and encourage them to work cooperatively, especially in evangelism through church planting and church extension.

Spending of funds received by VMC is confined to board approved programs and purchases. Each gift designated toward an approved program will be used as designated with the understanding that when any given need has been met, designated gifts will be used where needed most. Gifts of \$20 or more are acknowledged with an official tax receipt.

VMC is committed to financial accountability; all accounts are audited by an independent auditing firm; financial statements available on request.



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Why Belong to the Vision Ministries Canada Network?

Vision Ministries Canada was started in 1992 to stimulate church planting and evangelism among Canadian churches. Today, approximately 150 churches are affiliated with the VMC network—some are loosely connected, while others have a more intimate relationship. So why would a congregation want to be part of the VMC network? Below are thoughts from some of our partnering church leaders.

Guidance and Financial Assistance

VMC consults with churches that want to grow but aren't quite sure how to get there. We also provide financial assistance to launch new congregations. As a non-denominational ministry, North Park Church in London, ON, benefits from VMC's advice. "VMC has helped North Park on several occasions as we have looked for guidance on moving to a multi-site model and then shifting to a church planting model," says Executive Co-Lead Pastor, Wanda Silvester. "We have gleaned invaluable insight and help at each stage of the planning and implementation. There

was some financial assistance as well, which really helped set up [our daughter] congregations well."

As the lead pastor of a "first generation in Christianity" church, Pastor Samuel Keram from Spirit of Truth Church, is grateful for the way VMC engages with newcomers to overcome "material and communication problems." He is also thankful for the regular prayer gatherings, financial assistance, training and connections with Canadian-led churches. VMC assisted Samuel in forming Farsi Christian Ministries, a network of Farsi-speaking churches that reach out to newcomers from countries like Iran and Afghanistan.

Support to Catalyze New Things

VMC staff and volunteers enjoy helping church leaders pray and dream about how God is calling their congregation to build His Kingdom in their specific context. VMC has identified Vision Catalyzers across the country who are available to meet with primary church leaders to discern what the Holy Spirit is urging them toward. Catalyzers also walk alongside elder teams to develop church planting plans, communicate with the congregation, and discern potential planting teams. Catalyzers coach planting teams as they launch new initiatives.

VMC offers a comprehensive system for incubating church plants, including a bank account, online accounting, insurance, payroll system, and charitable receipting services. We also help with incorporation and charitable status applications.

More generally, Vision staff are available to guide leaders as they explore and experiment. "[North Park] has had such encouragement from VMC staff regarding our unique co-leadership model," says Wanda. "We appreciate their willingness to explore something new and not assume that the way things have always been done is the only good way."

Learning and Collaboration

VMC's Thinking Shrewdly conferences, regional gatherings, and quarterly regional cohort meetings foster learning and collaboration. Local church leaders can participate in one of our regional networks for peer support, coaching and opportunities for missional collaboration. "As a staff member at [Lincoln Road Chapel], I am grateful for our quarterly VMC regional network meetings. They give [leaders] a way to be encouraged in our roles but also to think and work together in our regional context," says Lead Pastor Reg Lewicki. "Hearing how God is working in other communities and learning from the wisdom from other pastors is a great encouragement."

Every other year, church leaders gather at the Thinking Shrewdly conference in Ontario, for two days of connection, prayer, worship, and learning. Thinking



Christian leaders at a VMC Event.

Shrewdly features well-known Christian leaders who teach on relevant topics, such as evangelism, missional expressions, and church planting. Leaders from within the VMC network facilitate workshops. Our Ministry Team seeks the Lord for a conference focus that responds to what the Spirit is doing. In 2023, we gathered young adult leaders and the theme was Fresh Imagination. In 2026, the theme is Gospeling.



VMC Board Member Ed Bryant

Working Together Across Cultures

VMC has a special flair for connecting Christian leaders across cultures. "I've spoken at [The Spirit of Truth Persian] church and some of the Chinese churches.

[My congregation] sees some of the ethnic churches as part of our Network family," says Matt Craig, Lead Pastor at Don Valley Bible Chapel. As an ethnically diverse church, Don Valley benefitted from VMC connecting them to VMC-affiliated ethnic church networks, including the Chinese Church Association, Farsi Christian Ministries, and the East African Church Planters.

Through a partnership with the Chinese Church Association, Don Valley has been able to reach out to the large Chinese community in their region.

Partners on the Journey

From guiding the birth of church plants to revitalizing congregations, VMC is a trusted ministry partner. "Having VMC network on the journey of ministry with

us has been invaluable. [We appreciate the network] as a resource, but most of all the camaraderie that comes from connecting with other pastors, leaders and practitioners as we serve God's kingdom together," says Reg.

Rinus Johnson from Varsity Chapel in AB says, "The greatest gift this partnership has given us is putting me in touch with [leaders] who are asking the questions we are asking: How do we follow Jesus faithfully in this time? What does mission look like in 2025? How do we walk alongside young people in their faith development?" He adds, "I have SO DEEPLY APPRECIATED being part of this conversation with numerous people across the network."

Nurturing, Inspiring and Collaborating with Leaders

NEED HELP? ACCESS VMC RESOURCES

- Access our resource library at vision-ministries.org/resources/for-church-leaders/
- Sign a VMC Partnership Agreement to deepen our relationship. Contact mike.stone@vision-ministries.org
- Ready to catalyze something new? Contact jay.gurnett@vision-ministries.org
- Inquire about our church revitalization help. Contact info@vision-ministries.org
- Save the date for Thinking Shrewdly 2026, April 23-25 vision-ministries.org/events/

Muslims Come to Faith Through Ottawa Church Plant

BY SANDRA REIMER

“My most important job as a pastor is to put the hands of my people into God’s hand,” says Omid Azgomi, an Iranian born church planter in Ottawa. Omid tells Iranian Muslims what Jesus can do for them and encourages them to ask Jesus for help with their problems. “They test it and find out Jesus works in their lives”.



Rev. Omid Azgomi planted an Iranian church in Ottawa.

A former Muslim, Omid was a pastor for 33 years in Iran before fleeing to Turkey. “I was sometimes in a very bad situation, sometimes in jail.” The Iranian government monitored his phone and email. Omid left his homeland when persecution of Christians intensified.

In 2019, he and his wife Sholeh and their two children emigrated to Ottawa. Omid couldn’t minister in person because of COVID restrictions that began in 2020, so he started an online service. Every Sunday morning he shared God’s Word with Christians from his former congregation who had fled to Germany, Northern Cyprus, Turkey and Sweden. He encouraged these believers to continue following God and sharing the Father’s love with people in their new countries.



In 2022, Omid started an in-person service. The Ottawa Persian Church is the only Persian church in Ottawa. The congregation connected to Farsi Christian

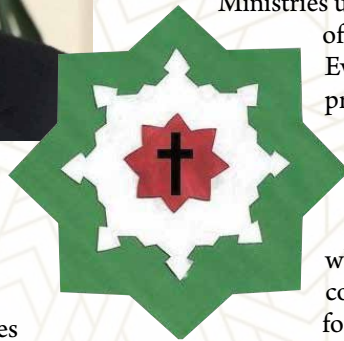
Ministries under the umbrella of the VMC Network. Every Sunday, Omid preaches two different sermons—one for the mature believers from around the world who meet as an online congregation and one for the newer believers in his Ottawa church.

The in-person congregation reaches new people as members tell friends, family, and acquaintances about the church. They also reach out through Facebook, Instagram and the secure messaging app Telegram. On these platforms, they invite people to church and inform them about their services helping refugees with their immigration cases. One Muslim refugee couple told Omid, “We came to get help with our immigration case but now we don’t care about that because we found Father God.”

In the church’s first year, four people were baptized. Then eight the next year followed by 42 people baptized in the third year! The growing congregation

meets Sunday afternoons in space rented from another church. They’re seeking a larger space for the 60 people who meet each week.

When asked what other VMC leaders can learn from what God is doing through his church, Omid says, “Pray, pray, pray!” He attends three group prayer meetings per week and prays on his own. The church hosts a weekly online meeting to pray that more Persians would come to faith and for the City of Ottawa. ■



COME TO
Thinking Shrewdly
TS2026: Gospel-ing



April 23-25, 2026
Church in Toronto,
North York, ON

Featured presenter:
Andrew Root

More info at
vision-ministries.org/events
Registration opens early December

Apprenticing Under the Master: Planting Churches that Make Disciples



BY MIKE STONE



I celebrated a milestone birthday earlier this year. To honour the occasion, my family gave me a Garmin watch. Not only does it

keep time, it measures my pulse ox, heart rate, daily steps, calories burned, and the all-important VO₂ max. Sure, I'm probably a bit obsessed with the daily health and performance reports. But the feedback has reshaped my personal rhythms—I'm more active, eat better, and sleep longer.

If only I were as attentive and responsive to the formative power of the gospel narrative.

A New way of knowing

When two of John's disciples asked Jesus where he was staying, Jesus responded, "Come and you will see" (Jn 1:39). They wanted a street address. He wanted to hang out. They ended up spending the day with Jesus, discovering not merely where he lived but how he lived.

When Jesus called his twelve to leave their fishing nets, tax booths, and revolutionary politics, it was an invitation to leave their existing way of being to discover a new one. This new way could only be embraced through intimacy and imitation.

The Hungarian-British polymath Michael Polanyi coined the term "tacit knowledge". This elusive type of knowing cannot be captured by language, theory, or a set of rules. It can only be seen by its action and acquired through personal involvement. One learns to play the violin,

pick up carpentry, or become a chef by apprenticing under a seasoned master.

With the words, "Come, follow me," Master Jesus invites us to apprentice with him to learn the way of faith and what it truly means to be human. His follow-up, "And I will make you fishers of men," implies a responsibility to help others do the same.

Planting spiritually formative communities

The Great Commission mentions baptism, the teachings of Jesus, obedience, and the ever-abiding presence of Jesus. It does not include an explicit call to start churches, at least not what most imagine when it comes to "church." However, there seems to be an implicit call for new communities that prioritize spiritual birth, formation, and shared intimacy with Jesus. Let's plant these!

At times, the church planting enterprise has been reductionistic, focusing mainly on launching a public worship service. While thoughtful liturgies can shape worshippers, the size and social dynamics of Sunday gatherings limit their formative potential. The sermon may catalyze conviction and conversion, but how many Canadians are reached, given the low percentage that attend worship regularly? A healthy ecclesiology invests in spiritual formation and gospel mission as much as gathered worship.

Please do not misunderstand me. As a church planting network and

...continued on next page



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organization, we want to see new churches host vibrant, participatory, formative, inspiring and life-giving worship gatherings. We're just less convinced this is the best starting point in a highly secular and pluralistic context. We want to shift the center of gravity "upstream."

Many newcomers to Canada come from countries where it is costly to follow Jesus, yet arrive with a deeper devotion for Jesus and greater evangelistic boldness than most Canadian believers exhibit. They come from places where large public worship events are prohibited or surveilled by the government. In the underground church, worship is unplugged. It's smaller and more clandestine than we are accustomed to. In these churches, evangelism and spiritual formation take center stage. Let's learn from these diaspora leaders.

Sharpening our evangelistic edge

To sharpen the evangelistic edge of church multiplication, VMC is committed to planting disciple-making communities on mission with Jesus that eventually launch public worship gatherings. What if the planting process looked more like this: enter the city to serve the city, announce the good news, make disciples, gather for formation, and then go public with a worship service?

Vision Ministries is taking steps to nurture this renewed emphasis on evangelistic multiplication across our church network and beyond (See sidebar). We invite you to join us as we apprentice under the Master.

Sparking Multiplication

Here's what VMC is doing to nurture a renewed emphasis on evangelistic multiplication in our network and beyond.

We will:

- Take eight catalysts to Church Planting Canada's Intersession; an event designed to inspire and initiate collaboration across denominations for the gospel saturation of Canada.
- Gather the VMC Advisory Council in mid-November to assess church planting proposals and provide start-up grants to seed new initiatives that prioritize disciple-making. We will also invite council members to examine the evangelistic essence of their own congregations.
- Ask VMC catalysts to seek permission from churches, ripe for planting, to form a team within the congregation that will plant within 12-24 months. Catalysts will nurture missional

initiatives and spiritual practices from the outset. (Part of our Planting from Within Initiative)



Andrew Root

- Focus on evangelism and disciple-making at our Thinking Shrewdly 2026 Conference (April 23-25). Our featured speaker is Andrew Root, author, speaker and Professor of Youth and Family at Luther Seminary. We're excited about Andy's ability to freshly unpack the gospel and explore how best to inculcate it among the emerging generation. ■

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www.vision-ministries.org

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