Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Encountering God

Spring 2020, Vol. 21, No. 1

Editorial

Andrew Dyck

The writer of 1 John begins with this introduction.

> *What was there from the beginning—which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have observed, and felt with our hands—is our subject: the word of life. The life was revealed. We have seen it; we are bearing witness and proclaiming to you the eternal life which existed with the Father and has been revealed to us. What we have seen and heard we are declaring to you as well, so that you also may share our fellowship: a fellowship which we have with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this in order that our joy may be complete!*[1]

The first disciples heard, gazed at, and touched Jesus from Nazareth. Through these physical human encounters, the disciples discovered that in Jesus God was displaying a life (*zoe* in Greek) that transcended biological existence (*bios*). This eternal life had existed as Creator and Word ever since "the beginning" (cf. Genesis 1:1, John 1:1). By knowing the man Jesus and being known by him, first century women and men discovered that they were entering into fellowship (i.e., communion) with the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The life they experienced thereby was so joy-filled that they felt compelled to talk and write about it to everyone they could, so that others too would enter the fellowship of God's joy.

Today, people continue to encounter God through the human means of physical senses, felt thoughts and intuitions, and interpersonal relationships. To put things more concretely, these means range from studying Scripture to hearing prophetic words, from praying to living with mentally disabled adults, from experiencing the silence of God to accompanying refugees, from hearing an inner voice to watching butterflies, from surviving trauma to receiving spiritual direction, from tasting bread and wine to meeting strangers. It seems that every kind of human experience can become an occasion for encountering God.

1 1 John 1:1–4 as translated in Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Bible Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 3.

Yet encounters with God are not always obvious or understandable. A neighbor once asked me whether he had encountered God. This man was in a volatile relationship with his girlfriend, who was the mother of their young daughter and who had a drug addiction. On a Friday morning while I was at home taking a Sabbath from my pastoral work, he came to me with this story: "I was sitting in the living room, looking out across the lawn and into the trees in the back gully. Suddenly I saw a huge bright light just outside the window. The light made me feel wonderful and peaceful. Was that God?"

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I certainly wanted that man to know God and to know the peace that God gives through Jesus Christ. But I found it difficult to discern whether this man had had a heavenly vision. Furthermore, this man lacked a vocabulary for talking much about his remarkable experience. Discerning God in our many human experiences requires spiritual sensitivity and wisdom—not least because, as in Ephesians 6:12, we also have the capacity to encounter spiritual forces that are evil (literally "spirituals of evil"). Looking back on that conversation, I wish I had been better equipped to discern the presence, work, and communication of the Holy Spirit.

However, although many people have experiences that they consider to be encounters with God, they often do not talk about these experiences. Perhaps they are afraid their stories will not be taken seriously. Perhaps they lack a vocabulary for narrating their most profound experiences. Perhaps our churches do not invite people's encounter-stories within the routines of worship services, fellowship groups, and adult Christian education. Perhaps we who claim to know Jesus Christ find ourselves pressed into an entirely immanent frame of reference, in which it seems beyond credulity to believe that God communicates with us—if we can believe in God at all.

This issue of *Vision* provides an opportunity to hear people's stories of encountering God. As well, this issue invites gracious and honest reflections on such encounters—reflections that draw on Scripture, theology, psychology, cross-cultural perspectives, missiology, and more. As

guest editor, I trust that this issue's focus on encountering God will help readers in at least three ways. First, I hope these articles and stories will provide readers with courage and vocabulary for sharing their own stories of encountering God. Second, I pray that this issue will prepare people to discern the wide-ranging activity, presence, and communication of the Holy Spirit. Third, I believe that these articles can increase our capacity for inviting others into life-giving fellowship with Jesus and his people. If these goals are achieved—even in part—our joy will increase.

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This issue begins with three articles that provide a framework for understanding encounters with God. Marlene Kropf, drawing on years of being attentive to the spiritual life of Mennonites, identifies a problem many have with encountering God—namely, being uncertain of what language to use for coming to God or uncertain whether we and God can connect at all. Marlene addresses this problem through a focus on intercessory prayer. Bible scholars Dan Nighswander and Pierre Gilbert offer grounds for recognizing the Holy Spirit. Dan draws on 1 Corinthians 12 to understand how God is revealed. Pierre addresses a topic that may feel foreign to some Western readers—namely, what differentiates encounters with spirits who are evil from encounters with the Spirit who is holy.

The next three articles provide approaches for pursuing encounters with God. Theologian Paul Doerksen draws on his experience with L'Arche communities to describe a posture of openness to encountering God. Alicia Buhler, herself a spiritual director, highlights spiritual direction as a practice of discernment. Psychologist Heather Campbell Enns writes about encountering God through images.

Although many people have experiences of God, many others find such experiences to be non-existent or at least problematic. Janet Peters, who gives leadership to Mennonite camps, writes about times when God seems absent. Grace Kang, a theology student, writes about the difficulties and opportunities that mental illness presents for encountering God.

In preparing this issue, I considered it essential to include stories of people who have encountered God in diverse ways. The next set of articles provides additional personal stories. As a pastor, Talashia Keim Yoder writes about the perspectives of children, while Marnie Klassen writes from the perspective of a young adult. Arisnel Mesidor (an immigration consultant), Brian Dyck (from Mennonite Central Committee), and Doug Schulz (a pastor) tell of meeting God through their experiences with refugees and newcomers to Canada. Four other pastors—Kathy McCamis, Karen Schellenberg, Jim Loepp Thiessen, and Vincent Solomon—tell of the ways God has called them into ministry or invited them into deeper ministry.

This issue of *Vision* ends with two writers who model winsome, joy-infused speech about God. Pastor J Janzen tells stories of the ways that one congregation is kindly evangelistic by inviting people to recognize and respond to their encounters with God. In a series of concluding missives, spiritual director Kevin Clark uses his poetic perspective to inspire us to recognize God in all things.

About the author

Andrew Dyck is assistant professor of Christian spirituality and pastoral ministry at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Does intercessory prayer still matter?

Marlene Kropf

Midweek prayer meetings have all but disappeared from the landscape of spiritual practices among North American Mennonite churches. With the demise of prayer meetings, corporate intercessory prayer has migrated to Sunday morning worship, which has become the main, and sometimes only, time congregations pray together as a body. Yet prayer of any kind—praise, confession, lament, thanksgiving, petition, intercession—often occupies little space in Mennonite worship today.

For a variety of reasons, midweek prayer meetings slowed to a halt during the 1960s–1970s. Increasing assimilation into the dominant culture, with its consumerism and hectic schedules, made church attendance beyond Sunday morning a lower priority than in previous generations. Emerging social activism made prayer seem less urgent, and the growing acceptance of a scientific worldview caused many to doubt the relevance of prayer. Furthermore, pastors were not being trained in the practices of prayer.

A middle-aged Mennonite university professor quickly responded, "Intercessory prayer embarrasses Mennonites. We don't know what to make of it. We'd rather be working; we'd rather be building something than praying."

Such influences have no doubt contributed to an erosion of prayer, thereby weakening the spiritual life of congregations. When I mentioned to a middle-aged Mennonite university professor that I was writing an article about intercessory prayer, he quickly responded, "Intercessory prayer embarrasses Mennonites. We don't know what to make of it. We'd rather be working; we'd rather be building something than praying."

A Sunday school class of people in their thirties told me, "We don't pray in public. Ask us to do anything at all in worship—preach, sing, prepare worship visuals, lead the children's time, anything at all—just don't ask us to lead in prayer."

Their experience is different from older generations for whom praying in public was an expected skill. Though congregants in the past rarely received formal instruction in the art of public prayer, they were expected to learn by osmosis, by listening to how others did it.

Discomfort with intercessory prayer

Lack of experience was likely not the primary issue for the young adults I taught. Their reluctance to pray in public had more to do with a basic unease with prayer, especially intercessory prayer, a discomfort that seems to be shared more broadly.

For example, prayer is not addressed in the current *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Though Christian discipleship and spirituality are included as topics, there are no explicit references to intercessory prayer.[1] Nor does the word "prayer" appear anywhere in the six-page Summary Statement of the Confession of Faith located at the conclusion of the document.[2]

Perhaps we should not be surprised by this evidence. In *Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit*, a book that mined the writings of early Anabaptists for their practice and theology of prayer, the authors found little information describing how Anabaptists prayed or taught others to pray. Being able to pray seems to have been taken for granted, implied in comments about readiness for baptism made by early Anabaptists who said that "candidates must be able to pray."[3] Often the martyrs, whose letters are found in *Martyrs Mirror*, include prayers for themselves, their families, and their communities of faith—prayers that reveal a deep confidence in God and trust in God's good purposes. But of instruction in prayer or guidance for corporate worship, few clues have been left behind.

Lest we be too hard on the early Anabaptists, we might remember that Scripture itself offers little explicit guidance. The word "intercession(s)" appears only four times in the New Revised Standard Version, with two of

1 Oblique references can be found: 1 Timothy 2:1–2, with its admonition to pray for rulers, is cited for the section "The Church's Relation to Government and Society"; a reference to praying for "righteousness and justice" occurs in the section "The Church in Mission."

2 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1995), 93–98.

3 Cited in Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall, *Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1994), 11.

these referring to human action and two to divine action.[4] The few times the verb "intercede" appears, it applies to human interactions, except in Romans 8 where the Holy Spirit's work as intercessor is described. The Apostle Paul seems to take intercessory prayer for granted when he assures his readers, "I remember you always in my prayers" (Romans 1:9). He often expresses thanks for the prayers offered on his behalf (see 2 Corinthians 1:11; Philippians 1:19). But again, no guidance is found for its role in worship or spiritual formation.

If our churches are to recover more vigorous practices of prayer—whether praise, confession, petition, or intercession—we will need to address at least three issues related to prayer: opportunity, freedom, and language/theology.

All of this is to say that intercessory prayer does not seem to have a particularly high profile among Mennonites.[5] But if prayer, both public and private, is a significant expression of spiritual vitality, then a dearth of intercessory prayer practices might warrant further examination. If our churches are to recover more vigorous practices of prayer—whether praise, confession, petition, or intercession—we will need to address at least three issues related to prayer: opportunity, freedom, and language/theology. Below I address each of these issues in turn, drawing from interviews with a group of currently active pastors in the United States and Canada, as well as from observations gathered in my former work as Denominational Minister of Worship and Spirituality with Mennonite Church USA.

Opportunity for prayer

Compared to churches with fixed forms of prayer in worship, Mennonites spend relatively little time praying in worship. A brief opening prayer, a

4 Of the latter, one is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and the other is the exalted Christ in Hebrews who "always lives to make intercession for us." The four references are 1 Samuel 2:25; Isaiah 53:12; 1 Timothy 2:1–2; Hebrews 7:25.

5 Another example of the scant mention of intercessory prayer in Mennonite documents is the 1995 vision statement adopted by the General Conference Mennonite Church and (Old) Mennonite Church, "Vision: Healing and Hope" (http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/1995-vision). Though the statement is a fine expression of our dream and God's dream for the healing of the world, the practice of prayer gets one brief nod in passing, and nothing at all is said of the essential role of intercessory prayer in transforming us and our world.

prayer of intercession for congregational concerns, and a closing prayer or benediction are the most one can expect in public worship. In some churches, prayers of confession may sometimes be included.

Sunday morning intercessory prayer goes by different names: the congregational prayer, the pastoral prayer, sharing joys and concerns, or response. In larger congregations, pastors tend to keep track of the needs and concerns of the congregation throughout the week and then weave them into the pastoral prayer, along with other local and global concerns. "It's a profound act of pastoral care," one pastor noted. In smaller congregations, a time for spontaneous sharing by worshipers is more likely to happen, followed by a prayer that gathers up the requests.

In general, pastors do most of the praying in worship. Given Mennonite preferences for egalitarian church structures, this practice is a bit surprising. And since the prayers of the faithful or the prayers of the people (intercession) were historically offered by lay leaders or deacons, current Mennonite practices seem somewhat incongruent.

One step toward expanding the opportunities for prayer is to recruit more people (including younger people) to lead public prayers, providing them with mentors or examples, as needed.

If congregations desire more vital spirituality, one way to encourage such growth is to expand the opportunities for prayer in worship—both the frequency of prayer and the personal engagement of worshipers. The motto of the ancient Christian church—*lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing)—reveals their conviction that what happens in worship is formative: how we pray in worship shapes the prayer and action of our daily lives. If we want ordinary Christians to encounter God more powerfully in prayer, then it must happen first in public worship.

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Another step is to invite vocal participation in intercessory prayers. For example, in a bidding prayer, various categories of needs are named—the congregation, the local community, and the world. In silent spaces in between, individuals can be encouraged to speak aloud their own specific requests—a way of breaking the sound barrier.

Other congregations engage worshipers in intercessory prayer with fixed responses. In one congregation, for example, congregational sharing is interspersed with an appropriate response:

Leader: Lord, in your mercy *or* *For this we say,*

People: Hear our prayer. *or* *Thank you, thank you.*

In some churches, the responses are sung. In *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #380, "Let us pray," can be used as either a petition, "Lord, hear our prayer," or a response of gratitude, "Thanks be to God." Other hymns can also be sung as responses to prayer, such as #358, "Oyenos, mi Dios," or #353, "Lord, listen to your children praying."

What these congregational responses do is open a pathway to prayer. People learn to speak their petitions to God, and in so doing, their hearts are opened to God's immanent presence even as their tongues are trained in the language of prayer.

Another way to expand the opportunities for prayer is to make space for extended times of prayer. On special occasions or holy days, such as Good Friday, some congregations participate in prayers of intercession as worshipers kneel beside a cross.

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Spiritual retreats provide a setting for practicing extended times of prayer. Seasonal retreats during Advent or Lent can be particularly fruitful times for deepening the practice of prayer.

A specific form of prayer that has grown significantly in recent years is prayers for healing with anointing. Though Mennonites have always practiced healing prayer, this ministry was usually offered at sickbeds or in private settings. By incorporating healing prayer into public worship, worshipers learn how to call on God in times of need; they discover the blessing of communal support and the power of corporate intercession.

Still another growing trend in Mennonite congregations is the reintroduction of small prayer rooms for meditation. Though these rooms were not unusual in the past, they disappeared or were turned into storage

closets during the years when prayer fell out of favor. Now these rooms are being simply decorated and equipped with comfortable chairs, a lamp, candles, a small collection of books about prayer, a notebook for prayer requests, finger labyrinths, and other aids for prayer. Simply by being available, prayer rooms encourage people to gather to pray.

Freedom to pray

Beyond expansion of opportunities for prayer, another approach for encouraging spiritual vitality is to cultivate a climate of freedom for prayer. Some pastors observe considerable reluctance to pray among lay people (much like the Sunday school class described earlier). While older generations may still value and believe in intercessory prayer, younger, more educated people struggle. One pastor said, "Prayer is a foreign thing in a secular world." People are often more comfortable saying to someone who has expressed a need, "I'll be thinking of you this week," rather than "I'll be praying for you." Still others think it is more useful to work harder and dispense with prayer.

While older generations may still value and believe in intercessory prayer, younger, more educated people struggle. One pastor said, "Prayer is a foreign thing in a secular world."

Another pastor observed that some intellectuals, particularly men, find intercessory prayer too vulnerable, and said "It feels awkward or pious or too evangelical," one pastor said. This pastor went on to tell of a group of urban Mennonites who met in the home of a family with a sick child. Though they thought they should pray for the child, they were sidetracked by a discussion about their discomfort and doubts about prayer. Finally they decided to "just do it"—on the off-chance that it might do some good.

Though such caution or resistance often stems from theological confusion, leaders can nurture a congregation toward more freedom to pray in two simple ways: by making space for silent prayer and by highlighting the role of singing as prayer.

If people are embarrassed to pray publicly, they may be more willing to participate in silent prayer. Freed from the judgment of others and even from their own doubts, they can address God or listen to God in whatever way feels comfortable. In one congregation, a small change has garnered positive response. When the instrumental prelude ends at the beginning

of worship, a leader strikes a gong. As noted in the bulletin, worshipers are invited to be silent and offer their prayers to God before worship begins (the silence lasts about two minutes). An opening hymn breaks the silence. This pause for prayer has transformed the first moments of worship into a more intentional encounter with the God who longs to meet her people.

The hesitance many people feel about engaging in public prayer usually disappears when they sing. Mennonites express far more passion for God in song than they likely disclose elsewhere. To strengthen the role of singing as prayer, leaders can note what kind of prayer is being offered: praise, thanksgiving, confession, lament, or intercession. Sometimes simply humming a stanza of song expands the freedom to pray, as does repeating a pertinent stanza or refrain. Because the whole self—body, heart, mind, soul—is engaged in singing, this mode of prayer can be a reliable path to intimacy with God and unity with other worshipers.

Language and theology of prayer

At root, the difficulties many contemporary Mennonites experience with intercessory prayer are theological. They arise from misunderstandings of the God to whom we pray and our expectations of what prayer does. The language used to talk *about* God or to talk *to* God in prayer reveals our theology and beliefs; our words also expose our own lived (or unlived) experience of God. This insight raises the questions: Who is the One to whom Mennonites pray in intercession? What do we think happens when we pray? And what difference does language make?

Other than the pastor of an immigrant church whom I interviewed, Mennonite pastors described their congregants' views of the God to whom they pray as all over the map. For some, God is "up there" or "out there"—all-powerful and ready to intervene, if asked. For others, God is a loving and compassionate Being who created the world but is no longer personally engaged with daily life. Some see God as indifferent, capricious, or arbitrary, a Being who cannot be trusted to act on their behalf. Still others view God not as a Being but as a form of loving energy flowing in the universe. In the immigrant church, worshipers tend to believe in a sovereign God who intervenes when people pray; as their pastor said, "We have nowhere else to go."

Despite these variations, many North American Mennonites would likely insist that they believe in a personal God. At the same time, unlike their immigrant sisters and brothers, they may not expect God to be

active in their lives or in the world. They might describe prayer as comforting or restorative. In a sense, prayer is palliative. It calms and soothes but fundamentally does not change anything. Corporate prayer is not a high priority where this attitude prevails because a low-grade suspicion of prayer persists beneath the surface. Intercessory prayer seems especially irrelevant because it does not seem to "work."

Clearly, there is a formation and teaching task ahead in order to reclaim the vitality of an encounter with God through prayer. If worshipers understand prayer as utilitarian, they will miss its potency and depth; if they perceive it as perfunctory, they will neglect its possibilities.

The Psalms model how to cultivate gratitude and resilience, how to remain faithful in prayer, even when evil and suffering seem to prevail. They show that prayer is more than *communication*; it is *communion*.

Pastors, spiritual directors, and other leaders who want to inspire more robust practices of prayer can do no better than to encourage in-depth exploration of the book of Psalms. With their breadth of imagery for God and honest portrayal of the whole range of human experience, the songs and prayers of the Psalms provide rich territory for theological inquiry. Prayers of praise, confession, and lament reveal a trust in an immanent and transcendent God, a God who is beyond our imagining but always near at hand. The Psalms model how to cultivate gratitude and resilience, how to remain faithful in prayer, even when evil and suffering seem to prevail. They show that prayer is more than *communication*; it is *communion*—a relationship, a way of being that unites us with God's purposes in the world.

If prayer is to be vital, the choice of words matters. Though there is a worthy place for the elegant language of classical prayers or artless, heartfelt spontaneous prayer, there is also a place for fresh poetic language and compelling images. Tired language strips the moment of its power; the attention of worshipers drifts away from an encounter with God. Authentic, creative speech not only brings us into God's presence but also draws us deeper into the depths of the Mystery.[6]

6 A particularly fine source of creative and biblically formed worship resources is the Iona Community: https://www.ionabooks.com/.

The compilers of worship resources in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* sought to expand the theological imagination of those who pray by choosing words to address God that resonate with the intent or focus of the prayer. Rather than rely heavily on overused names for God (masculine images like Lord or Father or conventional phrases like Almighty God), the editors selected fitting words of address such as "God our healer" for a prayer invoking God's mercy and comfort (#723); "Listening God" for a prayer of intercession (#719); "Spirit of peace" for a prayer inviting God to quiet and calm our hearts (#729); "Hidden God" for a prayer acknowledging God's mystery (#745). The pause in which God is named at the opening of a prayer is an opportunity not only to focus the congregation's encounter with God but also to enrich the formation and transformation of personal prayer.

Prayer is fundamentally an act of love. As we intercede, we join God in loving each other and the world. And because love always transforms both the giver and the receiver, intercessory prayer changes us and the world.

Fortunately, today's pastors are receiving more training in prayer practices. The practices of contemplative prayer, according to those I interviewed, have especially deepened their own relationship with God and offer rich possibilities for congregational life.

When sturdy foundations of teaching and modeling are provided, space is created for examining difficult questions: Who is listening when we pray? Who are we when we pray? How does intercessory prayer "work"? How does it form and shape our awareness of God's presence and activity in the world? How does it transform us? Through such exploration, the church experiences intercessory prayer not as an awkward formula or empty tradition but as living water that slakes our deepest thirst.

A personal word

In the end, prayer is fundamentally *an act of love*. As we intercede, we join God in loving each other and the world. And because love always transforms both the giver and the receiver, intercessory prayer changes us and the world.

I yearn for the day when intercessory prayer becomes as natural to us as breathing, because such prayer breeds compassion, an essential virtue for sustaining our life as peacemakers and as members of the body of

Christ. We cannot be a people of peace without the practice of intercessory prayer.

Praying for others engages us in the circle of love emanating from the Trinity. The Holy Spirit intercedes in prayer; Jesus intercedes; and so do we, as members of the Beloved Community. Intercessory prayer matters because it supports and expands the flow of God's healing love in the world. It gives us life and is the midwife of new birth in our world.

About the author

Marlene Kropf is retired from teaching worship and spiritual formation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and from her role as Denominational Minister of Worship and Spirituality, Mennonite Church USA. She continues to offer spiritual direction at her home in Port Townsend, Washington, and leads spiritual retreats and workshops in the Pacific Northwest.

Manifestations of the Spirit

Dan Nighswander

> *"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7).*[1]
>
> *"The United Brethren encouraged great emotional expression in their revival meeting—with crying, shouting, and singing—even jumping or leaping around the room. These spiritual expressions were an attraction for some observers, and a sign of religious superficiality to others."*[2]

Albert says he has never encountered God or had his prayers answered, so he does not believe there is a God. Bethany thinks Albert is being obtuse, because she senses spirits constantly and has no doubt that they link her to God. Carl is suspicious of Bethany's vague definitions, because he sees God's presence in the order and logic of the natural sciences. Delores dismisses science; she encounters God through speaking in tongues and wishes everyone could have this faith-shaping experience. Elmer would like to speak in tongues, but it has not happened for him; while he waits for that, he is sure that if people would do more to promote justice and equity, they would know God through doing God's work. Florence says Elmer is trying to earn his salvation, and she is satisfied to encounter God in the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, because we cannot do better than knowing Jesus. Grant does not have much patience with the Bible, but he knows that on August 17, 1988, he was born again, and if others cannot testify to having had a similar conversion, he does not see how they can claim to have met God. And so on.

Spiritual elitism shows up in many ways. It can be based on criteria of holding the "right" theology, practicing the "right" forms of worship, belonging to the "right" denomination or religion, doing the "right" things (or, more often, not doing the "wrong" things), or having the "right" (or

1 Unless otherwise identified, scripture references are to 1 Corinthians; quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

2 Samuel J. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2015), 44.

occasionally on not having the "wrong") experiences of encountering God.

Comparing God-encounters and ranking their value is a common practice. Some people think their own experiences are inadequate, perhaps not even valid, and envy what others report. Some people have been so deeply moved by their encounters with God that they think everyone should have the same experience. Sometimes people identify a particular experience as essential to the definition of who is "in" and dismiss the validity of any experience that falls short of that.

Sometimes people identify a particular experience as essential to the definition of who is "in" and dismiss the validity of any experience that falls short of that.

We might learn something valuable from 1 Corinthians which addresses, among other topics, the question of how God is revealed to or experienced by followers of Jesus.[3] A large part of this letter is Paul's response to a letter he had received from the church in Corinth (7:1 begins, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote . . ."). We do not have the letter Paul is responding to, but insofar as we can reconstruct what prompted Paul's response, part of it must have said something like this:

> *We are delighted to report that many of us have been gifted by the Holy Spirit to speak in tongues. This has become a large part of our worship service, and it builds up our faith. We think this demonstrates our spiritual maturity, and we want everyone in the assembly to speak in tongues.*[4]

In this reconstruction, there is no sign of controversy or division, but Paul knew that the Christians in Corinth were divided on many issues. The purpose of his letter was to counter those divisions, with the goal "that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1:10). The question is what divisions lurked behind their celebration of speaking in tongues.

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3 The following comments draw from my commentary *1 Corinthians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2017).

4 Nighswander, *1 Corinthians*, 270.

To answer that question, we must understand that people in the first-century Mediterranean world sought honour and avoided its opposite, shame. Honour was viewed as a limited good for which everyone competed. Honour status was gained by taking it from other people. It should not surprise us that these values were applied by Christians seeking the most honourable spiritual experiences and defending their "achievements" in comparison with what others had experienced.

From Paul's letter, we see that some Corinthian Christians claimed the honour of their wisdom, power, and noble birth (1:27). Their boasting (1:29, 31) and arrogance (4:18, 18; 5:2) demonstrated their sense of superiority over fellow Christians and fellow Corinthians alike. Some of the Christians (perhaps the "wise, powerful and well-born," perhaps others) were arrogant and boastful about their spiritual experiences, including their capacity to "speak in tongues." Surely this display of divine blessing demonstrated their close relationship with God.

Against those who were fixated on one kind of encounter with the Spirit, Paul pointed to many ways that the Spirit is "manifested"—that is, how the presence and activity of God's Spirit is revealed or demonstrated.

Paul agreed with his correspondents that speaking in tongues is a good way to encounter God—indeed, he himself practiced this more than anyone else (14:18), and he wished that everyone would have that experience (14:5). But he recognized that this does not happen.

Against those who were fixated on one kind of encounter with the Spirit, Paul pointed to many ways that the Spirit is "manifested"—that is, how the presence and activity of God's Spirit is revealed or demonstrated. That is the expression he used to talk about encounters with God: "manifestations of the Spirit" (12:7). And he was adamant that the Spirit is manifested in many ways—many "gifts," many "services," and many "activities" (12:4–6). He offers first a representative list of nine ways in which the Spirit is manifested (12:8–10), and then repeats it with variations in 12:28 and 12:29–30. Together these comprise a list of eleven manifestations of the Spirit, or ways of encountering God. This is not a comprehensive list; he could have added others, as he did in Romans 12:6–8 and Ephesians 4:11.

The common English translations may mislead our understanding of what Paul was writing about. Most of them introduce this part of the letter as "concerning spiritual gifts" (12:1; see also 14:1). The Greek word is simply "the spiritual" (*pneumatikos*), or "spiritual things." In other words, Paul is addressing ways that people encounter God. Every such encounter is a gift in the sense that it is given freely by God "who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses" (12:9, 11). But it was not "talents" or "abilities" that he had in mind, as we might think of "spiritual gifts." Rather, they are ways in which God's Spirit is manifested so that we humans can encounter God in ways that speak to our various needs.

With this understanding in mind, let us paraphrase the initial list that Paul offers in 12:8–10:

> *One person encounters God through the Spirit by hearing the utterance of wisdom,*
> *and another by hearing the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,*
> *another experiences God through faith by the same Spirit,*
> *another sees God in gifts of healing by the one Spirit,*
> *another in the working of miracles,*
> *another hears God's voice through proclamation,*
> *another by the discernment of spirits,*
> *another by hearing or speaking with various kinds of tongues,*
> *and yet another through the interpretation of tongues.*

And though these manifestations are given *through* individuals, they are given not *for* individuals but for the common good (12:7). Paul acknowledged the Corinthian Christians' passion for encountering God. He even encouraged them to be zealous in seeking Spirit manifestations (12:31). But he had different criteria than they had for ranking those experiences. Most important was the impact of the experience on others. "For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (14:2–3).

This consideration is repeated several times in different ways in chapter fourteen. Paul commonly used "building up" language, such as, "Let all things be done for building up" (14:26). This was applied to fellow believers who might witness or hear about manifestations of the Spirit.

Paul was also concerned for visitors who attend a Christian worship service. If they observe and hear demonstrations of the Spirit's presence that they do not understand, he wrote, they will dismiss it: "Will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (14:23). But if they hear and understand a prophetic word, they will encounter God: "That person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, 'God is really among you'" (14:25).

Encounters with God strengthen the faith and shape the life of the person who experiences them. Paul's experience, which is reported three times in Acts (9:1–22; 22:3–21; 26:1–18), was a prime example of this. Yet, the reports always emphasize the impact of those encounters on others: "For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you" (Act 26:16). Paul describes that dramatic and personal experience as a calling: "God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:15–16). When he wrote to the Christians in Corinth that the primary purpose of encounters with God is the "upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" of others (14:2–3), and especially of "outsiders or unbelievers" (14:23), he could point to his own experience as a model.

The weaker and more hidden parts of the body, Paul wrote, are "indispensable" and owed "greater honor" (12:22–24). No part of the body can deny their own part, and none can deny the value and integrity of others.

In the middle of writing about manifestations of the Spirit, Paul inserted two digressions that elaborate how these experiences are to be received in the faith community. The first of these uses the human body as an analogy for diversity and mutuality: "Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (12:12). The metaphor was commonly used in ancient times to argue that it is necessary for lesser members of the body politic to defer to those in control. Paul used it for the opposite argument. The weaker and more hidden parts of the body, he wrote, are "indispensable" and owed "greater honor" (12:22–24). No part of the body, and

likewise no part of the faith community, can deny their own part, and none can deny the value and integrity of others.

"We were all made to drink of one Spirit," Paul wrote (12:13). Their common source validates each person's religious experiences. The examples in my opening paragraph may reflect a natural inclination to fixate on the ways we ourselves have encountered God. That was the case also among the Corinthian Christians. But Paul rejected that. The person who speaks in tongues, he wrote, must also honor the one who speaks a prophetic word. The one who works for justice must also honor the one who studies the Scriptures. The one who experiences a gift of healing must also honor the one who speaks wisdom and the one who sees God in logic. And the one whose experiences of God are tentative, undramatic, and ambiguous is above all to be respected and honored.

Paul's second "digression" is the well known "love chapter" (13). Though it can be used for weddings, as it often is, the context of this chapter is in fact a faith community that is divided and contentious about many things—not least, their tendency to spiritual elitism. To people who were proud of their spiritual experiences, Paul wrote that however they encountered God, it was "nothing" if practiced without love for others in the community. "Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude," he wrote to people who were exactly that. "It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful" (13:4–5). When believers share with each other their experiences of God, they should both speak and hear each other in love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (13:7).

To people who were proud of their spiritual experiences, Paul wrote that however they encountered God, it was "nothing" if practiced without love for others in the community.

The literary form of 1 Corinthians is that of a letter, which is part of an ongoing conversation. It is not a systematic essay, so it does not answer all our questions. For example, it does not speak to questions about whether and how God is encountered in religions other than Christianity. And although Paul mentions "discernment of spirits," he does not say how to do that or by what criteria we might recognize when a spirit reveals God and when it does not. But it does challenge a limited view of what is an "appropriate" experience of God, and it challenges a self-gratifying possessiveness of such encounters.

The Spirit of God reveals itself in many ways, and these are given for building up the community of faith and for convincing unbelievers of the presence and activity of God. Such encounters are gifts to be received humbly and honoured whenever they occur.

About the author

Dan Nighswander lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has served as a pastor, denominational administrator, teacher, and missionary. Now retired, he continues to serve the church in volunteer capacities and to witness the Spirit manifested in many ways.

Demonic spirits and the Spirit of God

Pierre Gilbert

Surprised by war

A spiritual war has been going on for thousands of years. Because many of us who are Westerners have been programmed since childhood to think about human life in materialistic terms, it is not surprising that many people, even Christians, are reluctant to accept the reality of such a conflict.

Many people in the West subscribe to a secular humanist worldview in which humans are defined as no more than the sum of their biological processes. This view of human nature reduces the mind to the brain and denies the possibility of conscious life after death. What we are has been designed not by a loving God but by the impersonal forces of the cosmos that were unleashed randomly about 13.8 billion years ago.

Many people in the West subscribe to a secular humanist worldview in which humans are defined as no more than the sum of their biological processes.

In this metaphysically flat universe, there is no divine transcendence. Scant attention is given to how our actions, good and bad, contribute to the construction of our deep self. Not only do we give little consideration to the shape of our soul, but, more importantly and tragically, we accord nearly no importance to the impact of our thoughts and actions on our relationship with God. From a historical perspective, this is remarkable, for never before have men and women lived in a universe where the heavens were thought to be empty by so many.

As C. S. Lewis observes in the *Problem of Pain*, the nearly complete evacuation of the divine from our daily lives has become a major obstacle to sharing the Christian faith.[1] For the first time in history, the average person no longer has a clear sense of sin as traditionally understood.

1 For a detailed discussion, see C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996 [1940]), 48–62.

Whereas within historical Christianity, sin is viewed as an offense committed against a transcendent, holy God, many people now understand sin in solely immanent terms as pertaining only to offenses against persons, communities, or the earth. The cure, if there is to be one, will therefore reside not in the redemptive work of Christ but solely in politics and activism.

Christians, however, do not live in a merely secular universe. They believe in a personal God to whom they are morally accountable. They also grasp, in a way the secular mind cannot fathom, that actions, praiseworthy or not, have a cumulative impact on people's identity. Christians recognize that thoughts and actions leave etchings on the soul that in time mold their character. This is not to say that every Christian is fully aware of this spiritual dimension of life, but most of them would have some inkling of this reality.

Where Western Christians are likely to show resistance is in admitting the reality of a spiritual war that is integral to human existence. While most Christians recognize the necessity of living good and exemplary lives, fewer are willing to accept the reality of a spiritual conflict in which evil spirits seek to win souls to their side.

Demons, the Holy Spirit, and human free will

As I explain in my book *Demons, Lies, & Shadows*, the existence of the devil and demonic spirits cannot be empirically tested; demons cannot be weighed, measured, or photographed.[2] And yet the New Testament unambiguously refers to their objective existence and their malevolent intentions for God's project and humans.[3]

Popular culture has trained us to think in dualistic terms: good versus evil, the light side of the force versus its dark side, and so on. As appealing as it might be to conceptualize spiritual warfare as a conflict between demons and angels, that would not be accurate. While the New Testament refers to Satan, the devil, and demonic spirits, their real counterpart are not angels but the Holy Spirit. This does not mean, however, that this spiritual war directly pits the demonic and the divine against each other. Demons know all too well that God is infinitely beyond their reach. Their primary target is humanity.

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2 Pierre Gilbert, Demons, *Lies & Shadows: A Plea for a Return to Text and Reason* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2008), 17–44.

3 See, e.g., Matthew 4:1–11; 12:22–32; 15:21–28; Mark 1:21–28; 4:1–20; Luke 9:37–43; Acts 5:16; 8:5–8; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 6:10–20.

According to the New Testament, demonic spirits have the ability to interact with humans. Historical evidence seems to confirm this assessment. In cultures where the existence of spirits is integral to the belief system, men and women actively seek to communicate with them in the hope of gaining some kind of personal benefit.[4] Such interaction, however, consistently results in catastrophic outcomes for the individuals concerned and their communities. Several New Testament passages confirm both the sinister intentions of these creatures of darkness and the catastrophic consequences for those who fellowship with them.[5]

According to the New Testament, demonic spirits have the ability to interact with humans. Historical evidence seems to confirm this assessment.

As best as we can tell from the biblical evidence, Satan and other evil spirits emerged out of a rebellion against God (Jude 6; Revelation 12:7–10). God is free and will only have those who choose to serve God freely. As the first humans were given a critical opportunity to choose God (Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7), the same was apparently true for angelic beings.[6]

But angels are not humans. For reasons that are not revealed in Scripture, the angels that turned against God became something less, something *other*. They transformed into permanently bent creatures, reshaped beyond recognition and maniacally devoted to destroying humanity. Scripture seems to indicate that, for such creatures, there is no redemption; they are ultimately destined for destruction (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10).

The Holy Spirit also has the ability to relate to humans, but this interaction is deployed on an entirely different plane. In this respect, demons and the Holy Spirit have only one thing in common: they cannot significantly influence humans without their consent. God has endowed humans with self-determination; the Bible offers no evidence that the fall completely obliterated human free will. God's word to Cain to the effect that he could resist the impulse to kill his brother (Genesis 4:6–7) offers

4 For those interested in a first-hand description of the disastrous consequences of human interaction with demons, I recommend Mark Ritchie, *The Spirit of the Rainforest: A Yanomamö Shaman's Story*, 3rd ed. (Island Lake, IL: Island Lake, 2018).

5 See Matthew 8:28–29; Mark 5:3–5; Luke 8:27–29; 11:26; 1 Peter 5:8–9.

6 See Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 43–86, 223–265.

compelling evidence that humans retain an effective degree of self-determination.

Free will is most effectual in the spiritual sphere of human existence. If humans can resist God, as Scripture repeatedly shows,[7] surely this ability must extend to Satan and demons. The notion that evil spirits can possess a person without his or her consent is a false idea that originates from ancient Mesopotamia and finds little support in Scripture.[8]

The Holy Spirit does not compel. Instead, the Spirit's influence is subtle—more like a light breeze than a hurricane. The Spirit gently invites and graciously nudges us to act.

The Holy Spirit can indwell men and women who have chosen to accept God's invitation to enter into a relationship with Christ.[9] But that is only the beginning. The Spirit then guides and assists the follower of Christ in a variety of ways: recognizing and resisting sin, empowering for ministry, assisting in prayer, and so on.[10] The Spirit ennobles the human soul, makes us into the image of Christ, and empowers us to love and to serve others. The Holy Spirit does not compel. Instead, the Spirit's influence is subtle—more like a light breeze than a hurricane. The Spirit gently invites and graciously nudges us to act.

A Christian who chooses, however, to follow the impulses of fallen human nature will grieve the Spirit and seriously curtail the Spirit's ability to express the Spirit's presence (Ephesians 4:30). In order to be effective in our lives, the Spirit requires our constant cooperation.

Demonic spirits are on the other end of the spectrum. Once they gain a foothold in the life of an individual—either directly as in traditional cultures or through ideologies of death as is the case in secular settings—an unholy symbiosis emerges, one that is predicated on the all-encompassing

7 The capacity to defy God is perhaps best demonstrated by Adam and Eve's decision to challenge God's command to refrain from eating from the forbidden tree in Genesis 3. The Old Testament prophetic discourse is a witness to Israel's continual propensity to resist God even in the face of repeated divine judgements.

8 See Gilbert, *Demons, Lies & Shadows*, 17–44.

9 See, e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:11, 19; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Galatians 3:2.

10 See, e.g., John 14:26; 16:13; Romans 8:26; 15:16; Ephesians 2:22; 1 Thessalonians 1:5–6.

hatred these creatures have for God and on human nature's own innate hostility toward God (Colossians 1:21).

This is not to suggest that humans lack the ability to independently engage in radical evil. Jesus makes that clear when he states that evil naturally emerges from the human heart (Matthew 15:19). In other words, even without demonic influence, human history would still be littered with violence and cruelty. But if demons exist, then one can assume that whatever potential humans already have for evil, demons can—through some mysterious synergetic process—inspire, concentrate, and further focus this potential. While this is impossible to prove, it is conceivable that evil on the scale the world witnessed throughout the twentieth century may have partly been the result of direct or indirect demonic influence.

The remarkable case of a demon-possessed man (Mark 5)

The Gospel of Mark offers some interesting insights into the relationship between demons and humans. In chapter 5, the author describes the case of a man who is possessed by a "legion" of demons. The text does not explain how this man came to be possessed. We are only given a snapshot of the resulting condition. He is portrayed as living among the dead. He is completely out of control, self-destructive, and alienated from his family and the broader community (Mark 5:2–5). When Jesus goes to him, he is no more than the shell of a man; his humanity virtually destroyed. Demons need humans to spread evil, but their blind hatred for God and humanity is so intense, so blindingly fierce, and so encompassing that they will not hesitate to destroy the very hosts that enable them to wreak havoc in the world.

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But something remarkable emerges out of this account. The demons' ability to keep this man from encountering the Son of God is curbed by the man's innate capacity to turn to Jesus. Right from the outset, the man is unexpectedly described as coming from the tombs "to meet him" (5:2 NIV). If God will not compel anyone to turn to him, neither can demons keep anyone from reaching out to God.

As tragic as demon-possession may be for an individual, it is through the dissemination of demonic ideologies that large-scale destruction is most efficiently brought about. A demonic ideology, like a virus, can survive the near destruction of the original host and reinfect a new one in little time.[11]

The bottom line in all this is simple. Demons seek the moral corruption and destruction of men and women. They revel in creating chaos and hopelessness. What is deeply troubling in all this is that, despite the devastation it causes, interaction with demons or demonic ideologies is as addictive as heroin. Without the deployment of God's power in their lives, people inexplicably go back for more.

Demons poison life and take it away. The Holy Spirit carries the life of God and expands it wherever the Spirit is given the freedom to do so.

The Holy Spirit, in contrast, seeks to infuse all those who embrace Christ with life, hope, goodness, meaning, and purpose. I cannot overstate the importance of keeping front and center the principal difference between demonic spirits and the Holy Spirit. If demons are bent on hating God and everything that is associated with him, the Holy Spirit forever leans toward the Father and the Son. Demons poison life and take it away. The Holy Spirit carries the life of God and expands it wherever the Spirit is given the freedom to do so.

Conclusion

What are we to gather from this brief reflection on demons and the Holy Spirit? First, any interaction with demons is to be avoided at all costs. Nothing good ever comes out of such encounters. As for the ideologies of death that may be partly inspired by demons and further propagated through human networks, it is also our responsibility to be discerning and to resist them wherever they emerge. In this respect, we would do well to remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer and how he denounced the evils of Nazism.

Second, on the positive side of the ledger, interaction with the Holy Spirit is to be encouraged. The more we submit to the Spirit, the more

11 This is similar to the distinction C. S. Lewis makes between physical pain, which is limited to its immediate causes, and ideological evil, whose impact can reach far beyond the circumstances from which it originally emerged. *The Problem of Pain*, 117–18.

freedom the Spirit will have in shaping our inner self and using us for the glory of God.

My only caution is to tread lightly. The Holy Spirit is no opportunist. The Spirit does not prey on human weakness. When it comes to our partnering with God in the furtherance of God's Kingdom, the Holy Spirit is our greatest ally. The Spirit empowers, guides, and leads. But the leading of the Spirit is subtle and requires our collaboration.

While the broad strokes of what the Spirit calls us to do are clear, when it comes to the "smaller" choices of life—whether to reach out to someone in need or witness to the person sitting beside us on the plane—that requires special attentiveness to the presence and the leading of the Spirit.

There are no simple recipes for developing a greater sensitivity to the Spirit's voice. Suffice it to say that there are at least two things we can do, one negative and one positive. On the negative side, as much as is humanly possible, let us avoid the willful cultivation of sin, whether it be moral or ideological. Nothing silences the Spirit faster than willful disobedience and arrogance.

On the positive side, let us continually and intentionally call on the Spirit to increase the Spirit's presence in our lives (Ephesians 5:18). Unlike demons, whose obsessive desire is to destroy human freedom and dignity, with the Holy Spirit, it is the opposite. The more space we give the Spirit, the more we become what God intends for us to be: ever freer, more noble, and more life-giving.[12]

About the author

Pierre Gilbert is associate professor of Bible and theology at Canadian Mennonite University. Originally from Quebec City, he holds a PhD from the Université de Montréal and an MA from Providence Seminary. He is presently planning the publication of a book on the problem of evil based on Genesis 1–3. He is married to Monika.

12 For further reading on this topic, see Gilbert, *Demons, Lies & Shadows*; Page, *Powers of Evil*; and Willard Swartley, *Jesus, Deliver Us: Evil, Exorcism, and Exousiai* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019).

The experience of hoping for experience

Paul Doerksen

American theologian Stanley Hauerwas has repeatedly asserted that because he could not "get saved," he became a theologian. While Hauerwas may have been responding to the kind of experiences on offer in the context of his Texan upbringing, his assertion is more than a light, off-hand comment. Rather, Hauerwas directs us to consider what might qualify as "spiritual experience"; therefore, we are encouraged to reflect on what it is we search for in our lives and long for in our practices as we pursue the encountering of God.

Perhaps the best place for me to begin my reflections is to deny that encountering God is coterminous with feeling good.[1] Attempts to equate certain sensory experiences with encountering God carry with them the danger of domestication, as Rudolf Otto convincingly warned in his classic study of these matters.[2] Annie Dillard's more popular warning deserves attention:

> *Why do people in churches seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? . . . On the whole I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone else have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely evoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us*

1 Rowan Williams, addressing the basics of the Christian faith, shows that great writers on the Christian spiritual life have emphasized that encountering God through prayer is not about feeling good; he gives the example of Mother Teresa's descriptions of the years in which she felt practically no spiritual comfort, only isolation and darkness. Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 8–9.

2 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 12–24.

> *to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.*[3]

These warnings against domestication are essential in the consideration of encountering God, engendering as they should significant humility in the legitimate Christian desire for encountering the God whom we worship.[4] Though essential, these kinds of warnings should not have a deadening effect on that legitimate Christian desire. I suggest that we consider what might be called a more indirect approach to encountering God, by way of participation in practices and relationships that may allow for the possibility of experiences with God, always remembering that such experiences are not under our control. Put another way, a legitimate desire for encountering God can be pursued indirectly by "positioning" ourselves in such ways and putting ourselves in places where we can dare to hope for an encounter with God. Therefore, I will briefly describe two practices in my life that constitute pursuit of such positioning.

A legitimate desire for encountering God can be pursued indirectly by "positioning" ourselves in such ways and putting ourselves in places where we can dare to hope for an encounter with God.

The first of these indirect possibilities involves pursuing relationships with people who are part of the work of L'Arche Winnipeg. I have served on the board of L'Arche Winnipeg for nine years—an experience best described as an encounter with friends, which itself creates the possibility of encountering God, so it seems to me. I was introduced to the work of L'Arche through reading Hauerwas, subsequent to which I was invited to join the Winnipeg board through my friendship with a much-admired uncle, who was also a board member. This involvement led, in turn, to developing friendships with other board members. One of the practices in this community is that board members, prior to our monthly meetings, have dinner at the

3 Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 52–53.

4 A more fully developed study of encountering God would also consider the role of the senses in the perception of God. See, for example, Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

homes where our core members (people with disabilities) and assistants live. Core members also participate in the board's fundraising activities. These connections between core members and board members are an essential part of conducting our business as we seek to embody a vision of mutual transformation.

One of the most significant experiences involving the L'Arche community for me is attending our annual Christmas pageant. The core members take on the various dramatic roles in full and elaborate costuming; assistants and other volunteers lead singing, organize details, and do whatever else needs doing. This pageant may include a non-verbal Mary, Joseph in a wheelchair, and so on. The pace of the pageant is determined in large part by the ability of the actors. If it takes a long time for a shepherd or an angel to make their way across the stage, to finally arrive at the right spot, perhaps accompanied by an assistant, then that is the time it takes. The impact of seeing the pageant performed in this way always presses me to consider again the miracle of the incarnation in ways that I cannot recall experiencing elsewhere.[5] Briefly put, working with L'Arche Winnipeg, through participation in the friendships and activities that make up that community with board members and core members all together seeking mutual transformation, creates the possibility of encountering God.

Working with L'Arche Winnipeg, through participation in the friendships and activities that make up that community, creates the possibility of encountering God.

Even as I offer this assertion, I am aware that a danger lurks at the door. I am mindful of the temptation to embrace a view of people with disabilities that can veer dangerously close to utilitarianism—that is, of engaging with core members for reasons that are self-centered. For example, if I am convinced that my desire for encounter with God may be fulfilled to some degree by working with people with disabilities, then it becomes possible to use such work as a tool to pursue my personal good. Nonetheless, despite this (and other) cautions, my opportunity to be involved

5 To be clear, other Christmas pageants have affected me deeply—for example, seeing our daughters take on various parts when they were young girls. Fictionalized accounts of pageants that include unexpected "actors" or plot twists have also provided memorable opportunities to embrace the beauty of incarnation. See, for example, the pageant scenes in Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972); John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (Toronto: Ballantine, 1990).

in the L'Arche Winnipeg community remains an important part of my Christian life and practice.[6]

A second practice in which I participate also holds the possibility of encountering God (so I hope)—namely, the study of theology. My current position at Canadian Mennonite University calls for me to teach primarily in the field of theology. But long before I was hired to do this work on a vocational basis, like so many other people I read theology (narrowly and broadly understood) as a way of pursuing the practice of faith in God, not the pursuing of knowledge for its own sake. Teachers of theology are too often suspected of being "too academic," of not "being practical," of not being able to move that short distance from "the head to the heart" (whatever that phrase means), of being esoteric. Indeed, for some, describing a talk, a sermon, or an article as "too academic" serves as a knockdown critique—nothing more needs to be said as justification for ignoring the piece described thusly. I disagree. At the risk of self-justification and defensiveness, I want to argue that the study of theology, since it is an inquiry after God, carries with it the possibility of encountering the God after whom we inquire. As Ellen Charry puts it, "Theology is properly speaking a religious undertaking that seeks to draw readers into understanding God and interpreting themselves and reality on that basis."[7] Charry pushes her description of theological study further by pointing out that it is a "practice in which God's grace may reshape the seeker. . . . Engaged theological study itself *renders one vulnerable to God*."[8]

The study of theology, since it is an inquiry after God, carries with it the possibility of encountering the God after whom we inquire.

That last phrase encapsulates what I am trying to articulate about the possibility of encountering God in my life, about the hope of experienc-

6 Another, perhaps more obvious temptation, is that of assuming that work in this field consists in the clear identification of the one who helps and the one who needs help. L'Arche seeks to resist such a stance with its long-standing emphasis on the possibility of mutual transformation.

7 Ellen Charry, ed., *Inquiring after God: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), xvii. The quotation comes from Charry's introduction to the book.

8 Charry, *Inquiring after God*, xxiii; italics added for emphasis. Charry goes on to assert that authentic theological study "ought to transform as it informs" (xxiv).

ing God through the practices of being involved with the L'Arche Winnipeg community and studying and teaching theology. So much of these practices cannot be controlled, predicted, or harnessed, especially not for our own purposes, not even for the express purpose of encountering God, who is beyond our understanding and most certainly impermeable to our manipulations. We cannot break through to God, but God breaks through to us. However, perhaps I will encounter God's gracious love and presence as I engage in practices that at least render me vulnerable to God. And so I continue experiencing the perpetual hope of experiencing God.

About the author

Paul Doerksen is associate professor of theology and Anabaptist studies at Canadian Mennonite University and a member of River East Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

"Where is God in this?"

Discerning God's presence in spiritual direction

Alicia Buhler

Colette nestled into the couch as I sat across from her, sipping my tea.[1] After years of psychotherapy necessitated by the rocky foundation laid for her by a parent struggling with addiction, Colette had asked to meet with me for spiritual direction. She had collected and sorted many of the pieces of her shattered life, but she still did not feel whole and named a deep spiritual longing.

Colette grew up with a distant relationship to the Anglican Church and had sought belonging in an evangelical community in her early 20s, which resulted in further confusion and heartbreak. Neither church experience had been sufficient for the answers or tenderness that her soul needed. As she sat down for her first session with me—a minister and spiritual director—she asked upfront if I was going to try to convert her or get her to go to church. I appreciated her ability to ask directly for what she needed and assured her that I had no such agenda. I was more interested in her story.

As she sat down for her first session with me—a minister and spiritual director—she asked upfront if I was going to try to convert her or get her to go to church. I assured her I had no such agenda. I was more interested in her story.

She shared with me the dysfunction of her childhood and her meandering journey to find healing in adulthood. During her story, Colette paused, drawn to the dancing shadows of branches illuminated on the wall behind me by the midday sun. I asked what she was noticing. She confided in me her attraction to light. I watched her defenses relax as she shared with me the comfort she received as a child from the sun reflecting off a lake, about

1 Names and identifying details of spiritual direction clients, also called directees, have been changed to preserve anonymity.

the candles she lights out of her desperation for light on dreary winter evenings, and how she soaks up the sun every chance that she gets. I noticed her own radiance as she talked about the light, and I wondered out loud if perhaps light was one of the ways God shows up for her. Having had a complicated relationship with God her whole life, she had never considered the light to be of God, though she had certainly experienced it as transcendent, a comforting and healing presence. Colette followed up with me after that session to say that understanding her relationship with light as the God-presence in her life seemed so obvious to her now and had been a missing piece on her spiritual journey.

Searching for connection and meaning

Those who seek out a spiritual director to companion them do so out of diverse life contexts and for various reasons. However, at the center of their search is a desire for deeper connection and deeper meaning. We are spiritual creatures. As such, we are inclined to make meaning out of our lives. Those with the cognitive capacity to do so are usually asking, *Why?* Sometimes this search begins as we face a transition or acknowledge dissatisfaction with the way things are. More often it is when we have experienced a trauma or a loss, or when we are suffering, that we delve into the depths to make sense of things. It is often in the hard stuff of life where we discover that finding meaning has less to do with finding a reason and more to do with finding a connection beyond ourselves, a connection to something or someone greater than ourselves.

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Where is God in this? is the foundational question asked by spiritual directors. As directees share experiences from their day-to-day life, reveal what is on their heart and mind, and tell their story, directors listen with an ear tuned toward the Holy. *Where is God in the relationship difficulties between parent and child? Where is God in the monotony of work routines and school pickups? Where is God in the responsibilities of leadership? Where is God in the darkness of depression? Where is God in the prospects of a new job, new relationship, or new life course? Where is God in the chaos that is cancer or climate change? Where is God in the joys and challenges of living?* While the question takes many forms, directors are interested in cultivating that connection,

inviting the one they are companioning to open their awareness to themselves, to those around them, to the Holy, and to all of creation.

Discerning God's presence

Asking the question is simple. Discerning the answer is sometimes more difficult. In my work as a spiritual director, in my church community, and in life generally, I have noticed an emerging dis-ease with claiming something to be of God. Having a significant spiritual experience is not uncommon; talking about our spiritual encounters is. If we do risk sharing, we often place a caveat in front of our experiences of the Holy, offering that we *may* have sensed God's presence or received something from God in prayer, but we cannot be sure. We tend to view with suspicion those who claim certainty about knowing God's will, receiving a word from the Lord, or experiencing the Holy palpably.

Many of us carry heavy packs of spiritual baggage. Much harm has been done in the name of God. We are caught up in the whirlwind of abuses of power and the aftermath of people carrying out their own will in the name of God. I do not blame anyone who is suspicious of God-talk and understand the temptation to walk away from religion altogether. I also understand that others are grasping for certainty. They search for straightforward answers, boxes and boundaries, and binary right-and-wrong ways of looking at life or understanding God. I am witness to the desperate spiritual seeking of our time, the longing for deeper connection and deeper meaning in an age of mistrust and skepticism. This is why I am committed to the essential question, *Where is God (or other name for the Holy) in this?* and sifting through the spiritual baggage to find the answer.

Encountering the God of love

In order to discern where God is, we need to begin with who God is or what the nature of God is. Somehow, we need to be able to recognize the Spirit of God in our midst and be able to name it. Sorting out the answer to these questions is a monumental task that has been chipped away at by theologians, philosophers, ministers, the troubled, the curious, and the faithful for millennia. Given the countless books that have been written on the subject, I am tempted to surrender myself to the fact that God is only ever knowable in part.

What I have noticed in listening to people's sacred stories, however, is that there are generally two working understandings of God. Directees either know the Holy to be a God of love or a God of fear. Those who

have encountered the God of love generally have sensed God to be a compassionate presence and have experienced belonging in the Source of Love without need of earning their place or proving themselves worthy. In contrast, those who relate to God out of fear exhibit unhealthy self-sacrifice and too much concern with getting it right. These are signs that directees are working out of an inherent belief that God is not on their side, that God needs to be appeased, and that they must somehow earn their place of belonging. Sometimes the two are conflated: people may talk about a God of love, but when their stated beliefs are teased apart from their actions, it becomes clear that they are living as if God is harsh and judgmental.

Having done the necessary work of shifting my own image of God, I now recognize how these two faces of God played a role in my own spiritual development. While my childhood faith was nurtured in the language of a loving God, the practice of my faith was still focused on getting it right so that God would not be angry. Through academic study, therapy, and personal encounter, I released and continue to release false perceptions of God as I come to know ever more fully that the essence of God is love. Spiritual practices and contemplative prayer that invite me to dwell in the love of God have aided my spiritual re-formation. This lens of love changes everything and has become my most important tool in discerning, *Where is God in this?* If God is a God of love—and love is at the heart of the Christian faith (Matthew 22:36–40, Mark 12:28–31, 1 John 4:7–8)—then when I see signs of love in someone's life or in the world, I believe God is present there. If I say that God is a God of light and life (John 1:4–9), then when I see signs of light and life, I suspect God is there too.

Through academic study, therapy, and personal encounter, I released and continue to release false perceptions of God as I come to know ever more fully that the essence of God is love.

Focusing on the God of love in spiritual direction

The lens of love, light, and life that serves as a way of looking for the presence of God has been an important part of my spiritual direction practice. Some may argue that this method of discernment is too simple. I believe love can be simple. I am talking not about a sentimentalized version of love but about a love that is straightforward. I also recognize that love can

be complex. My focus on love, light, and life does not assume that whatever feels good is right. It is not a version of the adage, *If you're happy, then God is happy*. Love can demand a lot of us. It asks us to be and do better. It is expansive, diverse, and all-encompassing. It challenges us to grow in new ways. Indeed, faith lived with an understanding of a loving God at times may look much the same in practice as faith lived with an understanding of a judgmental God. However, the act of loving one's neighbor has a different quality depending on whether those actions come out of the foundation of generous love or desperate fear. There is an energizing quality to love, light, and life that is palpable.

Seeking God through the lens of love rather than judgment was particularly helpful in my work with Hans. Hans had been struggling with crippling anxiety for many years when he came to spiritual direction. He was able to identify that much of his struggle was rooted in his fear of God. When Hans was a young boy, his Sunday school teachers had literally put the fear of God into him, which was an effective way to get a rambunctious boy to behave but also resulted in a toxic image of God. While Hans talked about a God who loved him, his experience was of an abusive and judgmental God who was distant, withheld love, and required great sacrifice in order to be pleased. Hans's fear of a supposedly loving God caused his anxiety to spike, as he felt he should not be afraid God. Hans led an upstanding life, but he lived with the constant regret that every decision he had ever made was outside of the will of God.

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In order to overcome Hans's anxiety, we began to sort the false teachings he had received about God from the truth. When I considered the question, *Where is God in this?* I did not sense God in the judgmental presence that permeated Hans's life. Hans feared God, but Jesus did not have the same fearful hold on him, so Jesus became a trusted companion in the process. As we worked through his entrenched beliefs, I invited him to prayerfully ask Jesus questions such as, *Do I need to be a missionary overseas for God to love me? Do I need to read my Bible every single day without fail in order to be accepted in God's eyes?* Time and again I heard

Hans's desperate plea to Jesus, and time and again the response was compassionate love. I affirmed the moments in his life when Hans felt loved and accepted as reflecting the true nature of a loving God, and where fear remained, I gently suggested that more healing was needed. We worked together in spiritual direction for several years, and I watched as Hans was gradually released from the grip of anxiety and was welcomed into love.

As I companion directees who are seeking connection and searching for meaning, I am in awe of the ways in which the God of love shows up, nudging each person toward greater wholeness and desiring them to become all of who they have been divinely created and called to be. Thanks be to God.

About the author

Alicia Buhler, MDiv, is a spiritual care provider in private practice in Kitchener, Ontario. She is a graduate of Canadian Mennonite University and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and her education and ministry experience have focused on counseling, chaplaincy, and spiritual direction. She offers an awareness-based and spiritually integrated approach to inner growth work, informed by her interest in creativity, mystery, and embodied spirituality.

In the image of God

Heather Campbell-Enns

Scriptural images of God abound, representing God as a potter, a shepherd, a hen, the sun, a hammer, a protective shield, nourishing milk, a labouring woman, and more.[1] Divine imagery has various purposes, including evoking our curiosity about God. If we remain with our curiosity and examine the images, we are drawn into the scriptural story, and God's nature is revealed to us. Further, as we encounter God through imagery, the images become meaningful guideposts while we navigate our lives.

A conceptual understanding of God is a cognitive exercise, drawing on our intellectual capacities and our training to make sense of God. Conversely, understanding God's nature through divine imagery is an experiential and emotional activity,[2] a personal effort leading us to more fully experience who God is. Through this emotional work, we develop an understanding of how we feel about God and how God feels about us. I use the word "feel" because the term relates to emotion, and divine imagery connects to emotion within us.

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Many aspects of the divine are revealed to us throughout Scripture: Jesus as the bread, the Holy Spirit as the wind, the church as the bride of Christ, God's word as a lamp, and so on. Each metaphorical image suggests a way for us to relate to God. As we encounter the divine through images, we are drawn deeper into a relationship with God characterized by emotional connectedness.

1 Lauren Winner, *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 6.

2 Victor Counted, "Understanding God Images and God Concepts: Towards a Pastoral Hermeneutics of the God Attachment Experience," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015): 2.

Encounters with God through imagery

Below I share two personal stories to illustrate how divine imagery has guided me, including aiding me in better understanding my feelings toward God and God's feeling toward me.[3] The first story draws on Scripture directly and is an example of how we can seek out divine imagery through the Bible. The second story is an example of how divine imagery can find us, or appear to us, in unexpected ways.

Story 1. As a teenager, looking for direction in life, I was intrigued by what would become one of my favorite passages of the Bible, Isaiah 55:10–11 (NIV):

> *As the rain and the snow*
> *come down from heaven,*
> *and do not return to it*
> *without watering the earth*
> *and making it bud and flourish,*
> *so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,*
> *so is my word that goes out from my mouth:*
> *It will not return to me empty,*
> *but will accomplish what I desire*
> *and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

In reading this passage at that time, I understood God's word as an extension of God. I could feel an emotional connection to God through this passage. The rain and snow fell on me and bridged the distance between the realm of heaven and the earth. The image of God as rain and snow helped my teenage self feel God's nearness when I felt distanced from God. If I had imagined a gap between heaven and earth, between God and me, the gap closed when I called on the images of rain and snow. The rain and snow became tangible descriptors of God, revealing God's nature to me. I felt touched and nourished by my creator, and I understood God to be a caring God who was willing to draw near to me. I wanted to feel a closeness to God during this season of my life, and this need was fulfilled by encountering God's image through Scripture. In this way, imagery revealed God's nature to me and allowed me to make an emotional connection to God.

Story 2. In the final days before his death, my father-in-law was receiving palliative care in his home. I saw him during the day and then went

3 These represent two of many methods for encountering God through imagery.

for an evening bicycle ride in the forest near my home to work out my thoughts and feelings about his approaching death. I was holding feelings you would expect when witnessing a loved one die; I was grieving for my anticipated loss, but I was mostly grieving for the losses being experienced by my mother-in-law, my husband, and his siblings. Beyond these feelings of grief, I also felt uncertainty about my father-in-law's last days because he was worried about pain control. While he was well connected to his palliative care team, his health was changing rapidly, and it was hard for the family to keep up with his new and worsening symptoms at home. Ultimately, I felt uncertain about how he and his family would experience his dying.

In this peacefulness, I felt a connection to creation and our creator. At the same time, I felt the expansiveness and steadfastness of God across generations.

As I cycled through the forest, a doe came into the path ahead of me. She stood still, and I stopped moving. We took a long look at each other, and a wave of calm and relief came over me. Then she moved back into the trees, and I continued to cycle with a deep feeling of peace. In this peacefulness, I felt a connection to creation and our creator. At the same time, I felt the expansiveness and steadfastness of God across generations, and I had a sense of those who came before my father-in-law and those who were yet to come. I felt an emotional connection to God as I sensed the continuity of generations. Then, not long after, a buck came out of the trees. Again, I stopped, and he raised his antlered head as if to acknowledge me. He stood solidly for a few moments before he turned and walked back into the forest. I had an overwhelming feeling of the biblical text, "I am with you." I felt reassured by God. Whatever would come in the next days, my father-in-law would have the strength to face it, and his family would be fine after his death.

That day I encountered God as deer in the forest. These images revealed the nature of God and strengthened my understanding of God's presence in our lives. I had known this intellectually, but these encounters allowed me to feel them emotionally as well. On further reflection, it is no small thing these images of God, found in the forest, drew me into Scripture. It was in the forest that I truly *knew* the words of Isaiah 41:10:

> *Do not fear, for I am with you;*
> *do not be dismayed, for I am your God.*

I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Psychological perspectives of divine imagery

As I reflect on encountering God through imagery, I wonder why we draw on images of God in our daily lives. Working in the field of psychology, I am quick to look to psychological perspectives to provide explanations for why we may draw on divine imagery, particularly during times of distress.[4] From a psychological point of view, two main explanations come to mind regarding our encounters with God through imagery. The first explanation is our inclination to use spiritual-religious coping in distressing situations.[5] The second explanation depicts our use of divine imagery as a form of attachment when we seek safety.[6] Spiritual-religious coping and psychological attachment are "resource" theories, which consider God a resource that preserves us or enables us to be well when our wellbeing is otherwise threatened by adversity or stress.

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First, spiritual-religious coping involves methods related to the sacred, which enable us to deal with life events that we perceive to be negative.[7] Spiritual-religious coping is tied closely to culture, including the culture of belief. Therefore, it stands to reason that individuals and groups who are

4 Stress is the strain that comes with everyday stressors and is both uncomfortable and commonplace. However, when these stressors become overwhelming, we are at risk of becoming distressed. For many, to experience distress is to experience anguish, suffering, or misery. Distress is more worrisome than stress because it is potentially harmful in the short- or long-term since distress challenges our wellbeing in a multitude of ways (i.e., physically, socially, psychologically). Psychologically, one aim is to cope with stressors so they do not become distressing and harmful.

5 Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (New York: Guildford, 2001).

6 Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "An Attachment-Theory Approach to the Psychology of Religion," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 1 (1992): 6.

7 Kenneth I. Pargament and Hisham Abu Raiya, "A Decade of Research on the Psychology of Religion and Coping: Things We Assumed and Lessons We Learned," *Psyke & Logos* 28, no. 2 (2007): 743.

spiritual or religious may use a religious pathway to cope with adversity. Spiritual-religious coping includes prayer, reading Scripture, contemplation, using religious imagery, and more. Spiritual-religious coping functions to meet a variety of goals, including psychological goals (e.g., peace of mind), social goals (e.g., connectedness), sacred goals (e.g., knowing God), or a combination of these. Regardless of our goals, coping well with adversity can be enhanced by encountering God through images. This may be most true when people are supported in their social and cultural contexts by drawing on divine imagery. As a note of caution, spiritual-religious coping may be less effective, or even harmful, if it is not supported or legitimized by at least one important individual in the coping person's life. If not supported, persons who use spiritual-religious coping may find themselves feeling separate from their socio-cultural groups.

Attachment theory provides a second explanation for our use of divine imagery. This theory emphasizes the interactions between individuals and their caregivers or close others (i.e., attachment figures) when these interactions promote survival, safety, and security.[8] Divine attachment figures (e.g., God) have often been closely aligned with parental figures (i.e., God as parent), so that encountering God through imagery provides the presence of a parent-like figure in times of need. For religious individuals, feeling emotional closeness to divine attachment figures may meet the human need for bonding during adversity. Seeking or receiving images of God that are loving and, in the best sense, parent-like is an example of the attachment process. From an attachment perspective, the emotional connection to God through imagery allows us a sense of safety. Divine imagery allows us to be emotionally near to God and facilitates our sense of being known by God. Further, once formed, divine images are freely available to us at any time and can act as guideposts in our lives. We can call on images of God to accompany us and to support us as we celebrate,

Divine imagery allows us to be emotionally near to God and facilitates our sense of being known by God. Further, once formed, divine images are freely available to us at any time and can act as guideposts in our lives.

8 Mary S. Ainsworth and John Bowlby, "An Ethnological Approach to Personality Development," *The American Psychologist* 46, no.4 (1991): 333–41.

mourn, endure, and search throughout our Christian journey. Through this emotional connection to God, we can be nourished, be supported in our labors, and develop confidence and courage when needed.

We are made in God's image

Regardless of the psychological processes or motivations for encountering God through imagery, images of God can meet our emotional needs and encourage us to change or grow as Christians. When I encounter an image of God, I have the opportunity to consider how this image informs my Christian life. I am challenged to ask myself what the image means for me as a person made in God's image and what the image is directing me to do or be.[9] Each image may have a lesson that goes beyond meeting my personal needs. The image may encourage me to grow in my faith. It may encourage me to examine myself as one who is made in God's image, to wonder whether I am being challenged to bridge gaps like the rain and snow, or to be a calming and peaceful presence like the deer, or to stand solidly with others like the buck. As I ask these questions, I feel myself shift from the recipient of an image that meets my needs to a Christian who is growing and (hopefully) becoming better equipped to do God's work in the world today. These images ask me to wrestle with, and pursue, the many ways I might carry out these qualities of God in the world around me. Ultimately, being engaged with divine imagery can spur us to action. To me, this is both a challenge and a delight of encountering God through imagery. My hope is that we will seek out and study images of the divine in an effort to deepen our relationships with God. May these encounters flow through the church, challenging us to grow in God's image and further God's kingdom on earth.

About the author

Heather Campbell-Enns is an assistant professor of psychology at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She attends Homes Street Mennonite Church with her spouse and teenage children.

9 While writing this article, I had a conversation with Mary Reimer of Winnipeg, Manitoba, about divine imagery. I am grateful to Mary for challenging me to consider what these images are asking of me.

Experiencing the absence of God

Janet Peters

The Bible and the stories of the church are full of people encountering God—experiencing God's real and tangible presence in myriad ways. Burning bushes. Mysterious visitors. Dreams. Angels. Visions. Nature. Healing. The Word.

My own experiences of God's presence have been just as real and varied, if less spectacular. New insights. Serenity. The still, small voice. Love. Birth. Scripture. Church. Tradition. All of these, as well as our own stories, confirm that God is present and active in the world.

But the Bible and church history are also full of people *not* experiencing God's presence. Despite the strong testimony of the biblical story that God is with God's people—always—we also have a counter-testimony, an opposing witness, of people experiencing God's absence. Our biblical heroes and heroines did not always feel close to God. And they did not always feel that God was close to them. Many of the psalmists bear witness to times when God feels distant, hidden, absent.

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My own life has had many moments, and many months, when to all appearances God was absent. Unreachable. Even—dare I say it?—uncaring. Despite a lifetime of believing in and experiencing God's love for me, at times I wondered if I had made it all up. Surely, if what I believed to be true were true, people I loved would not have died far too young. Surely, if God were present and active in my life, I would receive the call to ministry for which I had been preparing and sacrificing. Surely. So why was it so hard to see, to find, to feel God? Why, when I needed God, did God feel far away and absent?

In those moments and months, it was good to have the witness of Scripture that others too have experienced God's absence. Job experi-

enced devastating loss and grief, with no answers and a God who seemed indifferent, even cruel. "When he passes me by, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him" (Job 9:11, NIV).

Is it that You pass by and move on
or is it that we fail to see and perceive?
Our perception
is our lived experience
is our reality
Right or wrong
our perception of Your absence
is what is real and true in that moment
and so
You have passed us by and moved on.
Even though a small part of me may know
You have not
that is how it feels
and so it is, in some sense, true.

Experiencing God's absence is not something for any of us to be ashamed of or afraid of. It is a part of our journey of faith. Life is not always easy. Clouds cover the sun. Shadows obscure our ability to see clearly. But our hope and prayer is that somewhere deep inside we know that life will get easier again, that the sun is still there, that someone will bring a flashlight to cut through the shadows. The Bible and the stories of the church tell us that our experience of God's absence is not the whole truth.

My own experiences also told me that the clouds and shadows were not the whole story. Within me was a nugget, maybe an ember, consisting of all the experiences I had had of God's presence in the past. The sun had been out, warming me and lighting my way.

In Psalm 22 the psalmist expresses feelings of abandonment but is reminded that their ancestors trusted God and that Yahweh has been their God since birth.

We feel abandoned by God
yet
we have stories of God's goodness
God feels far away
yet
we have memories of God's presence

Sometimes
the remembering
the knowing
the trusting
is all we have
until there is more
and we see, feel, experience, touch, taste
God again

That nugget, that ember, kept me searching for God. Although I was angry and scared and not at all certain of what I had been certain of before—although I felt completely abandoned by God—something kept me from completely abandoning God in return. My own experiences of God's presence and the stories of faith kept that ember alive.

Job heard God's voice and was assured of God's love again. The psalmist felt heard by God and was able to praise God again. I have also been able to hear God and to feel heard by God again. God did not remain absent forever. But my experience of God's absence has changed how I experience God's presence. I hold those moments of presence a little more loosely but with more attention. God's presence is not something I take for granted anymore. It is a gift that I treasure more deeply for having felt God's absence.

The psalmist says to God, "You turned away from me, and I was shattered" (Ps. 30:7, NLT).

can what was shattered be put back together?
maybe
with time and patience
but it won't look the same

the experience of God's absence
changes things
changes us
just as irrevocably
as the experience of God's presence

About the author

Janet Peters works as the program director for Mennonite Church Manitoba's camping ministry. She has recently rediscovered a love of writing as a way to converse with the Word.

Seeing angels

Christianity and the bipolar experience

Grace Kang

In 2015, I experienced intense visions of God and God's host of celestial beings. These visions would strike me at any time of day, but most frequently during times of prayer. I would see God's glory and the great host of witnesses, and even become acquainted with individual saints and angels. During this time, my friends found me charismatic, energetic, and even prophetic as I bounded around praying for strangers. In coming years, my friends referred back to this time as a golden age, remembering it fondly. I, on the other hand, sank into a strange despair.

The following summer, I experienced a dramatic shift in temperament, becoming irritable, depressed, and lethargic. The visions and feelings of God dried up like the last of a deluge in the Sahara. I was left with nothing but proverbial sand running through my desperate fingers. My prayers caused me suffering, not joy. I did not hear a single word from God for three years. I cried out to God in agony daily. Why wouldn't God speak to me? What happened to the prophetic words and visions? Why do I sit in this terrible frightening darkness?

My bipolar disorder diagnosis reduced my spiritual experiences to an imbalance of chemicals in my brain. The mystery and energy were gone. My experiences were merely symptoms of a disease, one that casts a shadow over the rest of my life.

Eventually I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. This diagnosis reduced my spiritual experiences to an imbalance of chemicals in my brain. The mystery and energy were gone. My experiences were merely symptoms of a disease, one that casts a shadow over the rest of my life.

Since my initial diagnosis, I have pondered what it means to be a Christian with bipolar disorder, particularly in light of my dramatic spiritual experiences. True, my experiences of spiritual grandeur and ecstasy

were likely facilitated by a chemical imbalance in my brain; but remembering the positive impact they had on my community, I began to suspect that dismissing these entire experiences as mania may not be truthful. I began to wonder whether God could work through mania and depression to bring about spiritual experiences that are real, albeit in unconventional ways.

Working through my Master of Arts degree at Canadian Mennonite University, I stumbled across Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. As I read their work, I recognized parallels between their lives and mine. On the one hand, Teresa experienced visions and supernatural happenings (even allegedly levitating during prayer!) throughout her life. On the other hand, John of the Cross experienced such spiritual darkness that nothing could bring him out of his suffering. Yet both these figures recognized that no matter what sufferings or joys they experienced in their souls, God was working in divine and lofty ways. If God could be seen in the dramatic experiences of these saints, perhaps God could be found in my own experiences as well.

Teresa of Avila experienced visions and supernatural happenings throughout her life. John of the Cross experienced such spiritual darkness that nothing could bring him out of his suffering.

God was most obvious in my mania because of the feelings of intimacy it procured with the divine. When I was diagnosed with bipolar, however, I began to doubt the legitimacy of these feelings. I once met with a therapist who was only interested in proving to me that all my visions and feelings were constructs of my imagination, recalled and elevated by my brain chemistry. I began to think of this explanation as a delegitimization of my experiences; but as time went on, I saw that visions and feelings cannot exist apart from our grounded realities. Clearly, my visions came out of my experience. We are all bound and enabled by our physical bodies; they are the vehicles by which we interpret and engage with the world. Thus, my brain chemistry will certainly be different when I am receiving visions. Perhaps it looks like a manic brain. Perhaps I am manic during those times. But this does not erase the possibility that something truly divine is happening in those moments, even if it is bound up in the symptom of an illness like bipolar.

Depression was more difficult for me to navigate, but John of the Cross became my guide. John of the Cross is most known for the phrase

"dark night of the soul," which describes periods of spiritual dryness, suffering, and obscurity. Yet John's dark night is not a negative thing but the necessary sensory and spiritual purgation on the path to knowing God more intimately. In sensory purgation, the sensory graces that allow us to experience God (e.g., visions, feelings of intimacy) are taken away. In spiritual purgation, the spiritual graces (e.g., intellectual revelations, the will to virtue) are taken away or diminished, leaving one barren in their pursuit of spiritual practices. It sounds unpleasant, but John attests that these purgations are *necessary* to help the soul rely solely on God and not on anything within or outside of ourselves. I was shocked when I read this. It turns out that parts of my depression can lead to spiritual growth. John's testimony reminded me that God is always working for our good, even in difficult and seemingly counterintuitive ways.

John's dark night of the soul is not a negative thing but the necessary sensory and spiritual purgation on the path to knowing God more intimately.

The greatest lesson I have learned from being a mentally ill Christian is not to count God out. God is there in the nurses, medications, brain chemistry, mood swings, and sleepless nights. God is with each of God's beloved creatures every step of the way and is bringing together all things to work together for good. Today I find hope amid the unending doctor's appointments, medicine changes, and mood swings because of the testimonies of people like Teresa and John, who declare that God is working even in the extreme highs and lows of human experience.

About the author

Haeon Grace Kang is a master's student at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manibota, studying the relationship between bipolar and Christian spirituality. She enjoys creating art and spending time with her bird and dog.

Children encounter God

Talashia Keim Yoder

A pathway of fairy lights and cello music brought the people into the sanctuary for the Ash Wednesday service. After Scripture was read, a song was sung, and a few brief instructions were given, those gathered began to explore the stations set up around the room. Young and old together, they buried their hands in soil, built vessels out of clay, lit Taizé candles, drank water, washed their hands, took deep breaths, and blew bubbles. Four-year-old Caleb lingered at one station, washing his hands over and over as his mother read the words, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10, NRSV). Across the room, six-year-old Malachi watched, spellbound, as 80-year-old Genny blew bubbles. "You make the winds your messengers" (Psalm 104:4) would never be the same for him. Together, the family of God explored their humanity, leading to the moment when they would come to the front to receive ashes on their foreheads. The littlest ones sensed the solemnity of this moment and looked at me with young, wise eyes as I traced the cross on their foreheads. Scripture was again read, a song was again sung, and the cello music played us out of the sanctuary.

Together, the family of God explored their humanity, leading to the moment when they would come to the front to receive ashes on their foreheads. The littlest ones sensed the solemnity of this moment.

We each encountered God in our own way that night. The encounter was specific to each of us. Simultaneously, it was an encounter of community, made possible by the body of Christ—the whole body of Christ, including the young.

Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, researcher-professor-practitioners, combined their individual research and together conducted new research for their book *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey*. Drawing on concepts from Sofia Cavelletti's *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, they listened to and observed children's understanding of and encounters with God. Their method was not didactic. The grownups in the room were

companions in the journey rather than teachers. "When we narrow our role to formal propositional teaching and external rewards to motivate learning, we often hinder faith formation," they observe.[1] Instead, they presented children with raw materials and allowed them to paint their picture of God. They caution, however, that this is not free-range faith formation. "Although children have great potential for experiencing God, if that potential is not actively nurtured, awareness of God can become and remain dormant."[2] They also concur with numerous other studies that have found that the direct influence of the church on children pales compared to the influence of the parents. Nurturing a child's potential can and should be done in the context of the church, but it is much more impactful if it happens alongside parents and caregivers, as well as in the home.

Nevertheless, the church can do much to bring out each child's potential. This begins with equipping parents and caregivers. Our church gives families framed blessings for their infants. We encourage the parents to choose one of these blessings to say daily. We have learned that the families that develop this habit with infants are far more likely to pray regularly with their children as they grow up, gifting the child with this foundational way of communicating with God. We have also given families prayer stations for their homes and led workshops on celebrating Advent, Lent, and other holy days at home.

We allow children to use their gifts to lead us. If a child has an encounter with God and wants to give testimony, we give them a platform to do that.

As a church, we can also model spiritual nurture. For example, when we treat a child's comment in children's time seriously rather than making it cute, we model respect for that child's journey. We allow children to use their gifts to lead us. If a child has an encounter with God and wants to give testimony, we give them a platform to do that. When God places a concern on a child's heart, we honor it. When a child rushes up to a pastor to tell them a dream they had about God, we get on their level and listen. We involve children in sermon preparation, listening to their

1 Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 39.

2 Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 43.

insights on the passage. We ask them to create art inspired by Scripture, or to paint God, and then we display that work in a gallery in the church. We name their encounters with God and give them language to name those encounters themselves. We honor their need to move by praying in yoga poses—and we learn that the rest of the church likes to do that too. We present the word of God as God's big story, one in which children are invited to take their place. We present the church as God's family and invite children to be instrumental members of it.

When our communal worship life embraces children, we are all enriched. Many Anabaptist congregations are word-centered, but only about a fourth of the population experiences God best through words.[3] When we incorporate emotion-centered, action-centered, and symbol-centered ways to encounter God (something we often do with children in mind), we all benefit. This involves a reimagining of congregational life, one that not only invites children in but that also allows all of us to experience God together.

When our communal worship life embraces children, we are all enriched.

Let's circle back to the Ash Wednesday service. Caleb, now seven and battling neuroblastoma, still sometimes recites Psalm 51:10 as he washes his hands. During his chemo treatments, when cleanliness was life and death for him, his hand-washing ritual took on new meaning. This was a God-encounter for him and for his family. Because he experienced that service alongside his mother, his encounter from that night came home with him and could grow in the context of his home and even the hospital. He encountered God with his mother and with his church family. That is powerful.

Children are an indispensable part of the Body of Christ. When we respect them as spiritual beings, allow them into holy moments, and follow them into their sense of mystery, they can show us the way to God's presence. Their encounters with God can transform us all.

About the author

Talashia Keim Yoder is a pastor at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana, who gives special attention to family ministry. She also is a continuing seminary student, theater director, mother to two young children, and spouse to Daniel Yoder.

3 David Csinos, *Children's Ministry That Fits: Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approaches to Nurturing Children's Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 52–56.

Encountering prayer, encountering others

Marnie Klassen

Like many young adults in the church, I have a complex relationship with prayer, and with people who pray. At different times, prayer has been meditative, prophetic, comforting, oppressive, troubling, and liberating. My diverse experiences of praying with others open up the question of how our assumptions around prayer and spirituality shape our spiritual friendships.

While the evangelicalism that enveloped my adolescence silenced and tired me in many ways, it also gave me a deep appreciation for prayer and an admiration for people of faith who are unafraid in their attempts to care for peers through prayer, conversation, and encouragement. This appreciation was solidified by an experience at a pivotal point in my life. I was eighteen and about to move two thousand kilometres away from home for school. On a rainy December evening, I attended a silent retreat at a retreat center near my parents' home. At the end of the retreat was an opportunity to receive prophetic prayer. As two unfamiliar men prayed with me and shared the images they received, I simply trusted. I trusted that there was a true and meaningful movement of the Spirit in this odd interaction. The room was warmly lit by candles and lamps, a haven from the drizzle outside. This event became a sacred moment in which I had the freedom to trust while maintaining a necessary skepticism.

Like many young adults in the church, I have a complex relationship with prayer, and with people who pray. At different times, prayer has been meditative, prophetic, comforting, oppressive, troubling, and liberating.

After this experience, my first several months at Canadian Mennonite University were somewhat shocking. I was excited to be among peers with similar political and theological views. When life threw curve balls at me, however, I yearned to pray with someone but did not know where to

turn because I did not see my peers engaging in spiritual practices or even in conversations about faith.

A year ago, I worked with the writings of the late priest and social theorist Ivan Illich. In his dazzling and compelling articulation of the gospel, Illich says, "[Faith] makes me aim at facing people with a willingness to take them for what they reveal about themselves—to take them, therefore, at their word—and not for what I know about them."[1]

In the months since reading this text, I have worked hard to do just that—to take people at their word. This exercise has resulted in a most extraordinary finding: people *are* willing to pray. I spent last summer working as the Bible instructor at a summer camp and regularly asked younger staff or campers if I could pray with them. I cannot recall anyone saying no. Throughout the summer, I saw these staff become comfortable praying with others, and I found myself surrounded by peers to whom I knew I could turn for encouragement and prayer. I was surrounded by spiritual companionship. I am no longer unsure of whom to turn to for prayer.

I am increasingly convinced that prayer is an important and beautiful aspect of spiritual friendship.

I am increasingly convinced that prayer is an important and beautiful aspect of spiritual friendship. At the same time, I am seeking to heed the words of a preacher who said that part of what it means to be a person of faith is to be open to being surprised.[2] The people of faith I am surrounded by often have a different spiritual *modus operandi* than I do. And yet, if we take each other at our word, we can encounter Christ side by side.

About the author

Marnie Klassen grew up straddling denominational lines in British Columbia. She currently lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where she studies social theology at Canadian Mennonite University and is a member at Home Street Mennonite Church.

1 Ivan Illich and David Cayley, "Gospel," in *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as Told to David Cayley* (Toronto: Anansi, 2005), 57.

2 Ryan Dueck, "Lift Up Your Eyes," January 3, 2016, Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

How we meet God through working with refugees

Arisnel Mesidor and Brian Dyck

For several years, we have been privileged to work with refugees and newcomers to Canada who have a refugee background. We believe that we have met God in the context of our work with refugees. Our experience working with refugees has demonstrated that God is indeed omnipresent and can be met (and worshiped) anywhere.

In addition to being an immigrant to Canada, I (Arisnel) have worked for ten years with many newcomers to Canada. I started at Accueil francophone, a settlement agency in Winnipeg. Three years later, I moved to Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Manitoba to be the associate coordinator and then coordinator of MCC's refugee sponsorship program. Today, I work as a self-employed regulated Canadian immigration consultant, serving asylum seekers, refugee claimants, protected persons, and newcomers to Canada from a refugee background.

We believe that we have met God in the context of our work with refugees. Our experience working with refugees has demonstrated that God is indeed omnipresent and can be met (and worshiped) anywhere.

Though I (Brian) was born in Canada, I grew up hearing stories of my grandparents fleeing Ukraine in the 1920s. Those stories shaped the way I understand my faith and how we treat others. My first real encounter with refugees happened in the 1990s when my wife, Lynell Bergen, and I pastored in southern Manitoba. After an appeal from MCC, the church agreed to sponsor not just one but two families of refugees. Later, after serving as a missionary in South Africa, I returned to Manitoba and took a job with MCC Manitoba's refugee resettlement program. When my job shifted to the national level, Arisnel joined me in the Manitoba office. Five years ago, I became MCC Canada's migration and resettlement coordinator.

Encountering God in refugees and their sponsors

In the Bible, we find dramatic interactions between God and humans. Abram heard God telling him to leave his home and set out for a place he did not know. Moses spoke with God directly and intimately and received the Law. In the New Testament, Stephen testified, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56, NIV). However, encounters with God do not have to be as dramatic as these biblical examples. Many Christians' encounters with God are subtle and easily missed. What brings us to faith in God and keeps us in faith is the realization that God is manifested in an infinite number of ways.

We have met God both in the faith and resilience of the refugees we have encountered and in the care and compassion of those who have welcomed refugees into their lives as sponsors.

Our personal encounters with God through working with refugees have not been as dramatic as what Abraham, Moses, or Stephen experienced. However, we are convinced we have met God both in the faith and resilience of the refugees we have encountered and in the care and compassion of those who have welcomed refugees into their lives as sponsors. Indeed, more than once, we have found ourselves emotional and speechless before the vast generosity Canadian sponsors have shown toward refugees—complete strangers whom they know nothing about and with whom they do not share religious beliefs, culture, or values.

In Canada, private individuals and groups who sponsor refugees make a large commitment. They need to raise funds, mobilize volunteers, and do a lot of paperwork. The financial commitment alone is approximately $16,500 to sponsor an individual or $28,000 for a family of four. After completing a sponsorship application, it can take two to twenty-four months for the refugees to arrive in Canada. Following their arrival, the sponsorship group enrolls children in schools, helps acquire government documents, facilitates access to settlement services, and so on. Private sponsors are required to accompany the newcomer family and pay for their living expenses for an entire year. Most importantly, sponsors provide friendships that sometimes last for decades. We have been privileged to walk with sponsoring groups on this journey. We have seen them struggle but also grow in their faith and in their understanding of the world and others.

Personally, each of us has learned a lot about faith and trust from the refugees we have helped resettle in Canada. When we hear refugees' stories about narrowly escaping death, torture, and other mistreatment to finally arrive in Canada—and when we observe how Canadian church members and others mobilize to provide refugees with a safe place to rebuild their lives—we cannot help but meet and see God at work. In an individualistic world where most people fear the other, it is amazing to see how God works through people to provide for those in need. In a world where there is often a lack of trust, it is remarkable to see the degree of faith refugees have by agreeing to set out for a place where they have never been and to entrust their lives to complete strangers.

Encountering God through our work with refugees

An encounter with God should enable a person to know and draw closer to God. The encounter should display the power of God tangibly and give a personal sense of God's loving-kindness. People like Moses experienced God's power and love in dramatic ways. In more subtle ways, our encounters with God through our work with refugees have done this as well. During those encounters, we have gone beyond reading Scripture about what God can do. As mentioned above, we believe we have seen God at work through the hands of those who welcome refugees by feeding the hungry, providing a home for the homeless, clothing the naked, and setting captives free (Matthew 25:35–36; Luke 4:18).

Yet the surprising thing for many who are involved in refugee sponsorship is that God's blessing flows both ways. The refugee sponsorships with which we have been involved always take us back to the story of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17. This story shows God at work with and for both Elijah (the "refugee") and the widow (the "refugee sponsor"). God brought together, in a way that only God can, two complete strangers who were in some ways enemies. Through the widow, God provided Elijah with safety, shelter, and food. Through Elijah, God alleviated the widow's poor economic conditions and spared her unique child from death. We have seen the same mutual transformation and mutual support in the lives of refugees and sponsors—probably the most inspiring thing we see and experience in our work.

The surprising thing for many who are involved in refugee sponsorship is that God's blessing flows both ways.

Working with refugees has taught us much. We have seen God open the eyes of the blind—of whom we are the first. These strangers have helped us and other sponsors understand what it means to have faith. It is one thing to talk about faith and even say that one has faith. It is another thing to live and walk by faith. Whether they are conscious of it or not, refugees live and walk by faith. When we meet them, they cause our faith in God to grow. Through them, we meet God.

In refugee sponsorships, we have the opportunity of being the hands and feet of Christ, but we also have the privilege of meeting Christ in the refugees we welcome into our communities.

The experiences and stories refugees share with us open our eyes and broaden our understanding of the true nature of our humanity. Refugees remind us how vulnerable we all are. Refugees teach us not to take anything for granted, something for which we are too often guilty. Refugees are the embodiment of Jesus's words, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NIV). In refugee sponsorships, we have the opportunity of being the hands and feet of Christ, but we also have the privilege of meeting Christ in the refugees we welcome into our communities.

About the authors

Arisnel Mesidor is a self-employed regulated Canadian immigration consultant. Brian Dyck is MCC Canada's migration and resettlement coordinator. Both live in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Hands full of bread

Seeing God in my refugee neighbors

Doug Schulz

On a rare sunny day in February 1997, I walked up Robson Street in Vancouver toward my new Afghani friend Mahmoud's hotdog stand for the first time. From a block away, I sniffed onions fried in butter and spices and saw a stream of customers hooked by the nose. As I drew near, a rough-clothed man—homeless, I figured—shuffled up to the cart. Mah's hand reached out with a fresh foot-long hotdog. The street guy bowed, took a big bite, and walked away. Without paying.

"You do that often?" I asked Mah.

"Allah always provides," he replied.

Mahmoud and I met that year while I pastored a Mennonite church near Vancouver. He had been an Afghani refugee who fled his nation after escaping a torture camp during the last year of Soviet occupation (1989). Mah called my church, which was close to his apartment, because he had heard Mennonites help refugees. He had just received a package from the Taliban containing a two-hour videotape of the execution of his father-in-law by flaying. In desperation, he begged me to help him bring family members to Canada from refugee camps where they lived in subsistence in Pakistan.

Over the next few years, my wife and I and friends signed our names to sponsor a dozen family members to Canada, but Mahmoud insisted he would pay their way. When his first brother arrived, Mah sold his hotdog business after saving $120,000, which he had kept in the lining of his deep freeze. ("I don't trust governments or banks," he said.) With the savings, he bought a transport truck, dumping a duffle bag of cash onto the sales desk. After three years hauling all over North America with his brother as co-driver, Mah sold the truck and bought a grocery store and then a restaurant. All of his family now have meaningful work, some in their own businesses.

Mahmoud made trips to Afghanistan over the years, donning a fake beard and—with the help of a cousin—delivering by night 40-kilo sacks of flour at doors of the poor in and around Kabul. On each sack he would

write *Allah provides*. He told me once that it is a mistake for people to look for God in a mosque or church because God cares for people of all faiths or no faith the same; and wherever religion hurts people, God is not present. But he came to a baptism service at my church one time. Afterward, he went to the tank to touch the water. "I have seen baptisms of blood," he said. "Here is a baptism of peace."

For forty years I have been part of refugee sponsorships—with "boat people," Afghanis, and lately Syrians fleeing dreadful war. I have learned to see God in every eye—and to agree that each hand was made to receive and offer bread.

Mahmoud lives today in a comfortable but simple home, driving old cars he maintains. He generously gives to causes of various kinds, especially sensitive to needs of people from his former land. A few years ago I asked Mah—after he had heard dreadful news about losses "back home"—how he keeps hopeful. He replied, "When I was being tortured by the Russians, taped down to the table, my world held nothing but pain and the sound of my own screams. But when they removed the instruments, and I could think widely once more, I looked at my hand. I told myself, if that hand is ever free again, I will always fill it with bread for my brother."

For forty years I have been part of refugee sponsorships—with "boat people," Afghanis, and lately Syrians fleeing dreadful war. I have learned to see God in every eye—and to agree that each hand was made to receive and offer bread.

About the author

Doug Schulz serves in a half-time ministry role at Grace Mennonite Church in St. Catharines, Ontario, focusing on pastoral care and outreach. He enjoys daily journaling, reading and writing poetry, and engaging with seven grandchildren.

Encountering God in a call to ministry

Kathy McCamis

Traditional ecclesial wisdom has held that there are two parts that must be taken into account in discerning a call to pastoral leadership in the church: the inner call recognized by the individual being called, and the outer call of the church in recognition of that individual's gifts and suitability for ministry.

Yet for many women who discern a call to pastoral leadership in church settings where women in ministry leadership is still a subject of some uncertainty, these inner and outer elements of call frequently do not align neatly or easily. What happens then?

In my own experience, there was an eighteen-year gap between my first encounter with God that led me to explore whether I was being called to vocational ministry and the time when the outer call of the church finally came into alignment with my own encounters with the call of God. In the wilderness of those long in-between years, holding onto the memories of those sacred moments of encounter sustained me.

For many women who discern a call to pastoral leadership in church settings where women in ministry leadership is still a subject of some uncertainty, the inner and outer elements of call frequently do not align neatly or easily.

I was twenty-two years old and midway through my final year of a degree in occupational therapy, the career that I had set my sights on since my senior year of high school. Within six months, I would graduate and enter the workforce, start earning a paycheck, and live the life that I had been dreaming about.

However, ever since I had decided to follow Jesus in my first year of university, I had been dealing with niggling questions about whether the neat and clean career path that I had envisioned for myself was consistent with what God wanted for my life and about how I might integrate my vocational life with my Christian faith.

With these questions in mind, I set out for InterVarsity's student missions conference Urbana 2000 that December—hoping to learn more about opportunities in the field of medical missions or how I might find other ways to integrate my faith and my vocation.

However, the flash of insight that I had been hoping for did not come. On the second-to-last day of the conference, I watched as thousands of other students around me stood to affirm their willingness to respond to God's call to serve in global missions. It seemed that, in spite of my hopes that God would descend and tell me how I could use my vocation to build the Kingdom of God, I was not one of the chosen.

It was the very otherness of this voice that gave me pause and cemented those words so clearly in my head that I can still hear them some nineteen years later.

On the final day of the conference, overwhelmed by all that I had been hearing and uncertain about how I might integrate any of it with my life once I returned home, I found myself sitting in the quiet of one of the conference's prayer rooms, asking God what I was to do next and wrestling with my lingering sense from the previous night that God might not want me after all.

Then, out of the blue and as clearly as if it had been spoken aloud (although I know it was not, if only because nobody else in the quiet room reacted in the least), I heard these words: "I need leaders in the church in North America too."

I had never before heard God speak to me so clearly and directly, and yet—although I journaled meticulously throughout the week of the conference about the people I met, speakers I heard, Scripture passages we studied, and even details of conversations with random strangers over breakfast—not a word about my experience that afternoon was recorded in my journal that day. It was simply too unlikely, too far outside of anything I had ever experienced or could begin to explain, too much like a week without enough sleep was making me think crazy thoughts.

After all, I had only been baptized about two years earlier. I was happily serving as an assistant to the preschool Sunday school teacher. Leadership in the church was the farthest thing from my mind.

Yet, it was the very otherness of this voice that gave me pause and cemented those words so clearly in my head that I can still hear them some nineteen years later.

As the years went by, and as my inner sense of call to pastoral ministry continued to grow and gain clarity, I would add other moments of encounter with God to the touchstones that I would draw on each time another congregation told me that they were not prepared to consider hiring a woman on their pastoral team or each time another man dismissed my opinion with the words *because you're a woman*.

Sometimes, those encounters came in the form of an encounter with Scripture in which a passage seemed to jump off the page and take on new meaning. Other times, insight came seemingly from nowhere as I took a long, prayerful walk in the woods. Still other times, I recognized a still, small voice within me whispering words of comfort and reassurance in the face of yet another bitter disappointment.

Often, these encounters arrived unexpectedly, upsetting my comfortable status quo in one way or another. Almost always, I learned to recognize God's voice precisely because the thought or idea that presented itself was so far removed from my own reflections that I knew that it could not have come from within. Unfailingly, God's voice was more patient, more loving, more generous and compassionate than I was capable of being with myself. Over time, I got better at recognizing when an experience was one of encounter with God, and when I was simply hearing my own inner voice. Exploring these moments of encounter with my spiritual director furthered my recognition of God's presence in my daily experience.

Unfailingly, God's voice was more patient, more loving, more generous and compassionate than I was capable of being with myself.

Now that I have the privilege of serving in full-time pastoral ministry in a congregation where my gifts are welcomed and affirmed and where I am free to serve as God has called me, I find that I look back wistfully on those years in the wilderness of the in-between, waiting for God's call to be fulfilled. As the outer call of the church has come into alignment with my own sense of God's call to me, I am learning to appreciate in new ways the voice of God that comes through the body of Christ, the church. These moments, too, are no less encounters with God.

And yet, I will always treasure those intimate moments of encountering God that sustained me in the in-between years, when it was God's voice and the experience of God's presence that led and restored, comforted and protected, named me as beloved and reassured me that I was

indeed wanted. These will continue to be sacred touchstones, places I return to in my memory, signs that point to a God who desires to know and be known. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

About the author

Kathy McCamis holds an MA in theological studies from Canadian Mennonite University and serves as associate pastor at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

When God's call is surprising and familiar

Karen Schellenberg

Twenty years ago, at six o'clock on a Saturday morning, at a camp on the south shore of Lake Manitoba, God called me to be a pastor. God's call was surprising and yet familiar, loud and yet completely silent, from somewhere outside of me and yet also from some place within. My encounter with God was holy, personal, and deeply meaningful. I have usually hesitated to tell this story because I fear people will not believe me or will think me spiritually arrogant by putting myself in the same league as Moses or Mary or Paul. It is difficult to put into words what God's call sounded like. It was not a voice but more of a feeling, a knowing, a warmth, or a nudge. I knew instantly that it was God, and I knew what God was saying to me. I walked out of my cabin after God called me and experienced a *light*-ness as I moved toward an early morning meeting.

My encounter with God was holy, personal, and deeply meaningful. It is difficult to put into words what God's call sounded like. It was not a voice but more of a feeling, a knowing, a warmth, or a nudge.

We were gathered as a church community for a retreat so that we could listen for God's voice together as we continued to search for pastoral leadership for our congregation. Our search was not going well. We were exhausted and in need of a divine breakthrough. My task was to join a small group of church members who would fill in for our weekend facilitator who had cancelled at the last minute. As I walked, I vowed to keep my encounter with God to myself. I was still processing it and did not know what words I would use to describe God's call, even if I tried. Moreover, I wanted to keep this holy gift for myself—at least for the time being.

All day, as I led and participated in the discussion, my mind kept flashing back to my encounter with God that morning. I wondered what would become of that call. Was it for now? For later? For someday in the distant future? And then, in the midst of all that was said that weekend,

one man said, "What if we already have the gifts in our group, and what if God is leading us to find a pastor from within?"

Instantly I felt a very great warmth from inside of me. I felt like everyone in the room was looking at me (but no one was). I felt like no one moved or talked for a long time (except they did). I felt like I was rising off my chair, while at the same time crawling under my chair to get away from the intense feelings I was experiencing. Ruth Haley Barton writes, "When God calls, it is a very big deal. It is holy ground. It produces within us such a reverence and awe that it's hard to know what to do with ourselves."[1] My solo encounter with God earlier that morning had (potentially) just been clarified by the community of God's people. Without knowing how this would unfold, I gave myself over to a journey that evidently God was inviting me to take.

When God called me, there was not a burning bush, a visit from an angel, or a blinding light from heaven; but the experience was life changing just the same.

In the following months, that small country church called me to be their pastor, and I have provided pastoral leadership in three other congregations since.

As I reflect on my "call" experience, I now see it more as a clarification than a call. My life experiences and education to that point had prepared me for pastoral ministry; and although I was not actively seeking a job as a pastor, it was not outside of the realm of possibilities. My encounter with God simply told me the time was right to enter more fully into the life and vocation that God knew would lead me to becoming more completely the person I was created to be. Palmer J. Parker says it well: "Vocation does not come from a voice 'out there' calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given to me at birth by God."[2]

When God called me, there was not a burning bush, a visit from an angel, or a blinding light from heaven; but the experience was life changing just the same. God called me at just the right time, in just the right way, so that I stopped, listened, and knew. I treasure this story and

1 Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 74.

2 Palmer J. Parker, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 10.

remember it often, especially when I feel overwhelmed or uncertain. In those times, I claim again the words of assurance God spoke to my biblical mentor Moses who was also called to a vocation for which he had been created. God said to Moses, God says to me, God says to all who are called, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12, NRSV).

About the author

Karen Schellenberg continues to grow into her call to pastoral ministry. After serving two congregations as a long-term pastor, she recently began her second stint as an interim pastor. Karen and her husband Tony live in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and enjoy frequent visits from their two grandchildren and three married children.

The Spirit's whisper

Jim Loepp Thiessen

Five years into pastoral ministry, I hit a wall. What did it mean to pastor? How did my faith bear out in my work with people? I felt dry. Not disillusioned, but longing for *more*.

A person in my congregation who was on a journey of healing from their past asked if they could offer a prayer time and bring others to pray. A retired Mennonite pastor whom I had not met previously came and opened our prayer time by saying that he believed the Holy Spirit guided our praying. He then started to pray for the person who wanted the meeting. I had walked with the person requesting prayer extensively, and I felt I knew the issues present. The pastor prayed a prayer that essentially named and held all the key issues. I assumed that he had also counselled the person requesting prayer. It turned out, however, that they had never met. I was stunned. I had never encountered "listening prayer" with that kind of Spirit-led sensitivity. I left that prayer time thinking that whatever that pastor had, I needed it in my life too.

I had never encountered "listening prayer" with that kind of Spirit-led sensitivity. I left that prayer time thinking that whatever that pastor had, I needed it in my life too.

That experience began a journey of encounter. I was prayed for by others who prayed with a holy anticipation of the power and possibility of prayer. Through prayer, I experienced Christ's deep and abiding peace fill my heart until it was almost bursting. As I was prayed for, thoughts with which I had struggled left—not from any force of my own but because of a deep flow of love that filled everything else and left no room for whatever else cluttered my heart.

This journey led me to a weekend event on praying and listening for the Holy Spirit's whisper. I was invited, in a room of two thousand people, to listen for God's heart for the stranger beside me, and—as a fun prayer experiment—to share what I sensed. As strangers listed what was on their heart for me, I felt a warm resonance. When I listened for them, I noted

a gentle whisper arising from within—something I would have ignored in the past. A name appeared in the breeze. It was so quiet I could have brushed it aside; but this was a stranger, and we were invited to listen. So I spoke the name that was on my heart: "I feel like there's someone named Walter who is important to God's heart for you—or has been important." As I uttered those words, I thought, *This is nuts! Why am I doing this?* The man's eyes grew wide. "Walter! Walter! He was someone I worked with. We had a falling out, and I felt like we'd dealt with it at the time. But he's been coming back to mind lately, and your word is the encouragement that I need to go back to him and reconcile." He excitedly called his wife, "This man received the name Walter!" They were both encouraged about the possibility of reconciling with someone whose name had risen in my spirit, and whom I had named in faith.

That season of life led me to much prayer, to being prayed for by others, and to much reading. Although many waters have flowed under the faith bridge since that experience twenty-five years ago, there are things from that season that continue to resonate with me. One is the power of creating an environment of spiritual expectation. As I grew in listening and praying for others, the possibility that God would meet us grew exponentially for me. When I pray with others, Scripture references sometimes appear in my spirit. As I follow them up, they often speak into situations in ways I could not. When invited, Jesus shows up to bring release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free, to be "the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our affliction" (2 Corinthians 1:3–4, ESV). Sometimes as I pray with people, tears arise, and I sense God's heart for the pain people carry. Occasionally, when I am with people who are open to listen for the Spirit's whispers and to intercede for others, I have them pray for me as I minister to others. I can even text them and invite them to pray, without disclosing anything about the people or situation where I am ministering: "I'm meeting with someone. If you hear anything as you pray . . ." Often their intercessory words have provided guidance and comfort—without breaking confidentiality. I can then say to those with whom I am ministering, "Here's something

As I grew in listening and praying for others, the possibility that God would meet us grew exponentially for me. When I pray with others, Scripture references sometimes appear in my spirit.

someone shared who does not know details about our meeting. Does this fit what you're experiencing?" When we share, we always recognize that "we see through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV) and that we "do not despise the words of prophets, but . . . hold fast to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21, NRSV).

A few weeks ago, I attended the church my in-laws lead. As is their pattern, they gave opportunity for receiving prayer by trained volunteers at the end of the service. I went forward. As the prayer flowed, I named my presenting request. The couple praying listened on my behalf. Then they named the even deeper request of my heart and God's hope for me in that desire. I left wonderfully encouraged. My question was known by the God who sees all and meets us in the gentle wind of the Holy Spirit.

About the author

Jim Loepp Thiessen is a pastor at Floradale Mennonite Church in Floradale, Ontario. He has been a pastor in Ontario for almost thirty years, where he has pastored established congregations and planted a church in Kitchener.

A calling that heals

Vincent Solomon

I was ten years old when I first heard God call me into the ministry. I was at the back of the church trying to sit still so that I would not get into trouble with my mom. Suddenly, during the sermon, I heard God say to me, "One day you will be a priest too." That powerful moment stayed with me into my teen years.

I moved from Norway House First Nation to Winnipeg in 1986 to study at the University of Manitoba. While there, I experienced culture shock and racism that was so severe that, after I completed the year, I vowed that I was not coming back to further my studies. At the time I thought, *So what if God had called me into the ordained ministry, and the only way to do this is to go through a seven-year education of first obtaining a Bachelor of Arts and then a Master of Divinity? Besides, God is the one who sent me down here (to Winnipeg) to experience all that prejudice and pain.* I returned home and prayed that God would really have to convince me that Winnipeg was the place where I was to be and that this was part of the path of my calling.

I returned home and prayed that God would really have to convince me that Winnipeg was the place where I was to be and that this was part of the path of my calling.

Many months later, God penetrated my anger and brought me to a place where I could hear afresh God's purpose for me. The first thing that I heard was that I was to go back to Winnipeg so that God could heal me in the place where I had been broken. The second was that my studies could resume when I was ready. After many arguments with God, I relented—in exhaustion and protest, I might add—and boarded a bus for Winnipeg.

Back in Winnipeg, I managed to get a job as a waiter and tried to live as faithfully as I could, despite the fact that I was back in the "city of barbarians." Most of the time I walked around dazed, in pain and discouraged. When the restaurant changed hands, the new owner took a dislike to me. One day, after hearing for the millionth time how stupid and inept I was, I prayed that God needed to do something, or I was going to quit.

Half an hour later, an elderly man walked in and proceeded to one of my tables without waiting to be seated. I thought that he was weird because, while sipping on his coffee, he stared at me the whole time I was waiting on others. Reluctantly, I returned to his table to see if I could warm up his beverage. He said, "No, thank you." Then he added, "I never come this way, but God has sent me to tell you that you are doing a good job and not to give up." In that moment, my legs almost gave way. All I wanted to do was to fall on my knees in repentance and thanksgiving. However, because of the crowded restaurant, I thanked God in my heart and silently cried with gratitude instead. As he walked out the door, I tried to catch up to him to thank him for the message, but he disappeared as soon as the door closed behind him. To this day, I am taken back to that moment whenever I am discouraged.

Over the years, God has been faithful in his promise of healing, and I have tried with God's help to be faithful in my calling as a priest to the people of God. My original plan was to go back up north after my theological training to minister in an Indigenous community, but God had other plans. So here I am, thirty-three years later, in a city that I have found to be not so "barbaric" after all.

I often hear stories of God self-revealing in extraordinary and supernatural ways to the Indigenous peoples of Winnipeg. God has provided healing and has sent someone to protect them in times of trouble.

God's calling has taken me to places of refreshment and of anguish. I have met many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who follow the Jesus path. They encounter Jesus in many ways. They see God in the people they meet, in the places they go, through Scripture, in their families, and in the church community.

I often hear stories of God self-revealing in extraordinary and supernatural ways to the Indigenous peoples of Winnipeg. God has provided for those in want and has sent others to comfort those in need of a word or a touch. God has provided healing and has sent someone to protect them in times of trouble.

To some people, these stories must sound unbelievable. In an urban setting and culture, it is often easier to reject such stories as nonsense and to dismiss them as the imaginings of a troubled mind. However, in the Indigenous community, whether in the city or on the reserve, these

stories are common and are believed to be truthful. In part, this is because Indigenous peoples have grown up with a sense of the spiritual all around them. They do not compartmentalize the physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. All exist and are just as true and real as what our senses reveal. Furthermore, we have been brought up to believe that the "Father of All" (a traditional Cree term for God) is all-loving and powerful. So why should the Creator not show this might to God's people—especially to those who have been hurt and marginalized in the most unbelievable ways by other people and by Canadian society as a whole.

Remarkably, I have heard testimonials of God speaking though Scripture to bring comfort, encouragement, words of love, and, when needed, words of reproach. Most of all, I hear words of joy and expressions of thankfulness for God's grace, love, and presence in the lives of God's people.

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During our worship times, I often sit in awe and wonder as I look at the people. Some of them have good reasons not to be there. Some have been hurt by the church, especially by its leaders. Even now, Indigenous people have been told by the church that their traditional teachings and ceremonies are of the devil. We have all heard, as did our ancestors before us, that in order to be "good Christians," we need to become white and to conform to the "civilization" that surrounds us. The resilience of the people and their grace to forgive are revealed every time they walk through the door of the church building. Their attendance in a service speaks of their faith. They have come not to commune with an institution but to meet and listen for their Creator. They come to worship because they have met the living God.

Our church community also includes non-Indigenous folk who have experienced God in their lives. These people have found a home to belong to, with a people that love and want them. It is a place of true reconciliation between peoples. It is a place where Christ is tearing down dividing walls and building a new humanity (Ephesians 2). God is encountered and witnessed in our time together. Our hope is that others who come to worship with us will see this.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul asks the church to make his joy complete by being "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (2:2). In doing this, we reveal God to one another and to the world.

About the author

Vincent Solomon is Cree from Norway House First Nation. Currently he serves as Priest at Epiphany Indigenous Anglican Church in Winnipeg and at St. Philip's Anglican Church at Scanterbury in the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. Vincent is also the Indigenous Ministry Developer for the Diocese of Rupert's Land.

Call and answer?

The art of altar calls in the twenty-first century

J Janzen

I never set out to be a paid pastor. That was partly due to my experience as a radio producer with Family Life Network,[1] where for nearly six years I led a team that created recording events with roughly sixty-five Anabaptist-Mennonite churches across Canada. During this time, I observed that many congregations did much the same thing: pews facing forward airplane style, thirty minutes of singing, announcements, a thirty-to-forty-minute sermon, the end. Meanwhile, church leaders lamented that attendance was declining, that people seemed disinterested in participating in worship, and that youth were ambivalent about Christian faith. In my view, what churches commonly offered up for worship was boring and theologically problematic.[2] To complicate matters further, I had the strong impression that churches were not interested in changing. I wondered why churches kept doing the same thing when the approach clearly was not working.

In my view, what churches commonly offered up for worship was boring and theologically problematic. To complicate matters further, I had the strong impression that churches were not interested in changing.

1 Family Life Network is a Winnipeg-based media agency formerly known as Mennonite Brethren Communications.

2 In *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Bantam, 1967), Marshall McLuhan, a Catholic communications theorist, notes that *how* and *what* we communicate are equally important. For example, if a church says that everyone matters, but only the preacher and music leader speak into microphones, the actions (medium) contradict the message. Anabaptist theology holds that Christian faith is a lifestyle, not just a system of beliefs. Highland Community Church's worship is participatory so that our words and actions (medium and message) are congruent—people light candles and draw pictures at prayer stations, children raise hands in blessing, questions are asked during or after a sermon, and so on.

At the same time, I was producing segments for *GodTalk*, a call-in show on CJOB68, then the largest commercial radio station in Manitoba.[3] CJOB insisted that the *GodTalk* hosts were to be explicitly Christian but were *not* to "shove religion down people's throats." Nor were they allowed to say that all religions are equal or the same since that makes for boring talk radio. It became apparent to me that Canadian culture was suffering from church fatigue. Guests and callers repeatedly indicated a hunger to discuss spiritual matters but did not see Christianity as a viable option.

It was our guests—the Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Wiccans, atheists, and other non-Christians—who frequently thanked us for our willingness to ask questions and genuinely listen, thereby creating a space to discuss faith.

For some, Christianity was passé: over-familiarity left people hungry for something novel. Others simply regarded Christianity as irrelevant: the spiritual fire insurance was nice, but Christianity did not seem to have anything to say about life here and now. More often, however, Christianity was repellent: church people were arrogant, argumentative, antagonistic. Indeed, Christians routinely phoned in to question the faith of our hosts because they did not tell people they were wrong, to complain that we did not warn people they were going to hell, and to demand that we preach the gospel more.

Somewhat surprisingly, it was our guests—the Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Wiccans, atheists, and other non-Christians—who frequently thanked us for our willingness to ask questions and genuinely listen, thereby creating a space to discuss faith.

By 2007, I was convinced that there were appropriate ways to talk about Christian faith in an evangelistic way in the secularized and pluralistic North American environment, but I doubted that the church was truly interested in being a place where that might happen.

And then God and a particular church surprised me.

In the fall of 2007, Highland Community Church invited me to be their pastor.[4] My wife and I initially declined. But the church responded,

3 *GodTalk* was hosted by David Balzer and Chris Wells.

4 Highland is a Mennonite Brethren congregation in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

"We didn't hear you say no; we just heard you say you're not sure. Let's try it for a year."

We accepted, and a year later, everyone agreed to continue together indefinitely. Because of Highland's flexibility, I stumbled into a role in a community with which I resonated deeply. Attitudes and practices and formational spaces existed at Highland before I arrived; I have simply tried to curate them by naming them, adding some, and adjusting others. What I have done is relatively basic: I have insisted that the most radical thing we can do is to do what we say what we are going to do, which is to help people to know Jesus, love one another, and cooperate with God's work in the world. I am happy to say that for the past twelve years, I have found myself at an intersection where people have met God in and through the church. Below I explain how we have done so.

Centered-set composure

Highland respects people wherever they are at in their faith journey. People are given room to grow out of some things and into others. This means that Highlanders tend to remain calm when someone has questions or doubts about spirituality or struggles with unhealthy behaviours. Highlanders do not assume that because something has gone wrong a person has lost his or her faith. Theirs is not an all-or-nothing perspective. Rather, they assume that all of us will find ourselves at different places at different times, and Christians often find themselves having to bear things they cannot help.

Our hospitable posture is consistent with a centred-set understanding in which everyone is called to an ongoing process of regeneration.

This hospitable posture is consistent with a centred-set understanding in which everyone is called to an ongoing process of regeneration.[5] There is always more to learn, new ways to become more fully human in the image of the resurrected Son. So when I am having coffee with a sixty-year follower of Jesus or a person who has spent less than sixty seconds in a church, my question is the same: "What would it

5 See Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Conversion: Doorway to Discipleship*, edited by Henry J. Schmidt (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1980), 88–98; Paul G. Hiebert, "The Category *Christian* in the Mission Task," in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 107–36.

look like for you to take another step closer to Jesus, or how might you turn more to the Light?"[6]

I have never been disappointed.

A non-Christian woman once said to me, "I was hurt by some Christians in my teens, and I've been angry at the church ever since. That's a lot of people to resent, and I don't want to live that way anymore. Can you forgive me?" Another time a mature Christian who is a recovering alcoholic expressed a desire to grow in prayer. Both of these confessions were moves toward the Fullness of Life (John 10:10). Because different people take different steps towards Jesus, when the denominational survey asks for the number of conversions at Highland in the past year, my answer is "Countless."[7]

We do not determine who is in or out; that is God's job. Nor do we need to defend God or argue people into the Kingdom.

Contemplative-charismatic confidence

Tied to this centred-set approach is a contemplative-charismatic conviction that God's Spirit is present and active in *all* people's lives, whether they confess Jesus as Lord or not. Furthermore, we do not determine who is in or out; that is God's job. Nor do we need to defend God or argue people into the Kingdom. If God is who we say God is, then God is big enough to look after Godself. We therefore trust that the Holy Spirit will convict and convert. Our role is simply to tell our stories of how we have experienced Jesus and to interact with our neighbors, looking to point out where we see the characteristics of Jesus already present in their lives.[8]

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6 This invitation is practiced almost every Sunday. The worship leader brings the Christ candle into the congregation, stands by the Gospel reader and says, "The candle reminds us that Jesus is present in Spirit among us as a gathered community. Please stand and turn to the Light as we hear the Gospel."

7 The gospel is that Jesus comes to defeat evil, sin, and death so that all creation might be restored. Within that cosmic work of redemption, people are invited to experience salvation by following Jesus. As they do so, they become fully alive humans (as per God's original intent) in the image of the Resurrected Son. This understanding broadens the scope of evangelism to include steps of repentance and steps towards holiness (sanctification). In that sense, a "conversion moment" is any shift in the direction of God that leaves someone more Christ-like.

8 Lesslie Newbigin articulates this posture on the basis of John 16 in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 123.

Consider Phil. He arrived at Highland with his family ten years ago. Phil described himself as agnostic. He looks after our church's IT needs. He participates in our congregational meetings. He joined a small group, and we became friends. Eventually, we found ourselves together on my back porch. "Phil," I asked, "where are you at with this whole Jesus and God thing?"

"Well," he said, "I have a hard time believing that Jesus is God. But I want to integrate his teachings into my life, and I want my kids to live like Jesus, too."

"Let me get this straight," I replied. "You want to obey and imitate Jesus?"

"Yes," Phil said.

"Do you know what we call those people?" I asked.

Phil shrugged, "No."

"We call them Christians," I grinned.

"I'm going to have to think about that," Phil laughed.

A few years later, Phil participated in our sixteen-week season of baptismal preparation and received a prayer rope that he frequently uses to pray.[9] Phil has not made a verbal confession of faith in the form of the "sinner's prayer," yet his behaviour demonstrates the ongoing work of the Spirit. My role is akin to blowing on the embers of a fire; I often say, "You're looking more and more like Jesus, Phil."

Permissions rather than prescriptions

The attitudes, postures, and practices I am describing are not for the faint of heart. Forbearance is necessary because conversion is messy. Since the Truth is a living Person, we who point people to the Truth do not get to set the sequence or pace of redemption according to our preferences. What we think a person ought to focus on cleaning up may not be what the Truth has as top priority.

Indeed, if one listens carefully to my preaching, one will notice the absence of phrases such as, "It *must* have felt this way," or "You *need* to do (or not do) *x*." Rather, listeners will hear phrases such as, "I wonder what

9 Our process is designed for people considering baptism, people who wish to deepen faith by renewing their baptismal vows, and people interested in exploring faith. Participants are not required to be baptized. Our practice is an adaptation of the catechumenate at Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle, Washington, which is profiled in Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

it would look like" or "One possibility might be *x*." Some suggest that this open-endedness is too "wishy-washy"—a failure of conviction and the neglect of my pastoral responsibility. But I am being directive, just in a different way. Instead of dictating a one-size-fits-all approach, I am instructing people to focus attention on a goal—namely, Jesus. The ways by which people get to Jesus will be different, but *how* they arrive is not as important as *that* they arrive. I strive to give people permission to imagine, together with the Spirit, what a suitable response of faithfulness might be, given someone's particular circumstances.[10] For example, I teach people to pray. The mode might vary: meditating on an icon, speaking in tongues, journaling, chanting the Psalms. What matters is that people are praying.

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Holy indifference

The sorts of "altar calls" I am describing require a holy indifference vis-à-vis control and success. A few years ago, a member of Highland ate the Lord's Supper during a worship gathering. "As I came forward, I thought I

10 It is impractical to think that I could set out specific steps for everyone; that requires an omniscience that is not humanly possible. Instead, I tend to prescribe certain practices and postures, or offer good questions to ask that should lead to better answers, or provide a framework with some degree of flexibility that a person can apply to their daily circumstances. More important, I am not advocating relativism. For a worthwhile conversation to happen, everyone involved needs have some degree of conviction. To say that all religions are equally valid (or not) and all paths lead to the same truth (or not) is another arrogant form of bigotry that shuts down dialogue, just as it is equally unproductive to say, "I'm right, you're wrong, and you just need to toe this line." Genuine dialogue tends to happen when those involved say, "Our perspectives differ. You think your way is right; I'm confident that Jesus is the Way, Truth, and Life. Let's compare what we believe." As we discover similarities and note differences, the Christian can trust that the Spirit will convict and convert. And at the end, the Christian will have deepened her own faith, while also having dignified her friend by learning something about her deeply held beliefs.

was done with church," she said, "but when I walked away from the table, something had changed."[11]

No one foresaw that a mouthful of bread and juice would renew a commitment to the Body of Christ. But God delights in coloring outside the lines: appearing in burning bushes, a talking donkey, a baby in diapers, tongues of fire, emotions, and physical touch.[12] As a result, Highland experiments with multisensory worship experiences.[13] When (not if) mistakes happen, we try to learn.[14] When people dislike what is offered (some find our playfulness offensive), we do not get discouraged.[15] And when something good happens, we rejoice.

The fact that Highland has doubled in size in the last decade suggests that Highland's consistently open-handed invitation has proven to be winsome (rather than coercive) more often than not. More important, the fact that we have seen people "walking in the newness of Life" indi-

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11 I am aware of a second conversion experience like this at Highland. These transformative encounters in the Eucharist give me pause when it comes to an open communion table. At the very least, people (including children) ought to be warned that they risk being changed if they participate in the meal. See Annie Dillard, *The Annie Dillard Reader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 38.

12 Lorlie Barkman, a Mennonite Brethren pastor and television producer, describes this as paraword communication: "Bibles with Jesus's words in red lead us to focus solely on what Jesus says. But read the Bible with a pencil and circle all of the things God *does*. You'll see God does much that is nonverbal."

13 For example, Christine Kampen, a pastor at Highland, used Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son. She had people stand and place their hands on the back of a chair, posing as the father who embraces the son by his shoulders. Then people knelt and leaned their faces against the back of a chair, posing as the son before his father. The physical experience of Jesus's parable brought insight and healing to many.

14 Pierre Gilbert, a professor at Canadian Mennonite University, once suggested that the church should be like a science lab and experiment. If things blow up, clean up the mess and try something else. If a new concept proves effective, great! An experimental mindset also frees us to abandon something when it is no longer suitable.

15 In *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image, 1986), Henri Nouwen teaches that if your self-worth depends on other people's behavior, you will run the risk of trying to manipulate others to satiate your emotional needs. People generally retreat from this unhealthy dependence. For there to be a healthy relationship, you need to let others have the freedom to be who they are (for good and for ill), while at the same time doing the work of having your sense of identity and worth centred in God. This sort of posture is necessary if Christians are to tell people that Jesus loves them and wants to be their friend in a way that is not manipulative. When I do not measure my faithfulness by the quantity or quality of responses of other people, then the invitation I offer has no strings attached, and it truly is a gift that one can freely accept or reject.

cates that *something*—better yet, *Someone*—is working. Much to our delight, our call is being answered. People are discovering what we hold to be true: that Jesus is the most precious treasure one can discover.

About the author

J Janzen has served as pastoral elder at Highland Community Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia, for twelve years. When not doing churchy things, J can be found writing the occasional article, coaching baseball, or camping with his family.

Missives from a spiritual director

Kevin Clark

During my years as a pastor, spiritual director, and instructor in spiritual formation and direction at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia, I have been invited to be present to others as the Spirit stirs their hearts and minds towards God's immanence. Their journeys have shaped my own experiences of God. Growing in awareness of God is a continuously unfolding process that is always true to God's steadfast love found in Christ Jesus. My own contemplative awareness has been shaped by responding to nuanced thought, noticing a word emerging from Scripture, reflecting on experiences that evoke meaning, and living in a community that shapes the moment. I do not claim to be a theologian, but I am a practitioner, one who is on a journey with others, following Jesus into the daily journey of discovering the love of Christ that is present for all—as in the apostle Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 3:14–21). What follows are a few of the missives that I have sent over the past seven years to the spiritual director peer groups that I supervise.

My own contemplative awareness has been shaped by responding to nuanced thought, noticing a word emerging from Scripture, reflecting on experiences that evoke meaning, and living in a community that shapes the moment.

June
Greetings, All:

With the summer equinox in reach, I trust all is well on your present journey.

My past several months have been a certain "fullness of time" and I feel very grateful for the many gifts received along the way–family, companionship of friends, a new emerging awareness of God, fullness of grief in the death of someone near, the painfulness of empathy for/with others–all with much grace, paired with the hope of God present in the midst of it all.

Yet it is emerging impasses that create dependence on God (with ego kicking and screaming the whole time)–a dependence beyond the self-assured stance of "I can do this God, you just bless it."

Grateful for the prayers of "kindred spirits" like you all. You have been in my thoughts much, even more so since it seems a long time since we have been together.

September
Greetings, All:

Yesterday afternoon I found myself in awe of the wonder and beauty of the day. The memory of it is still full of texture and breath.

The scene: sitting in my parked car, all windows down, with the wind blowing a certain freshness of life, and my view across a very large open field of clover framed 180 degrees by the Blue Ridge Mountains. Clear sky, warm sun, and the fullness of solitude–mine to enjoy.

Yet I was not alone: thousands of clouded yellow butterflies in a dance that covered the field with motion. These inspiring beauties were animated by the wind, while fully engaging each other in their own rhythmic movement in fullness of life. They became a mesmerizing prayer of desired abandonment to enter the invitation to dance with others in the Spirit of Christ.

I now recognize that a day and a moment are paradoxes of time and the eternal coalescing. The late summer breeze was signaling a shift. The butterflies seemed to know it, and I sensed it somewhere within. It was the familiarity of a seasonal turning, the length of light becoming more of darkness, reminding me of the need to let go–not fully ready just yet to enter that particular movement of life eternal (seasons do change), but somehow wanting to be willing.

The moment has passed in real time, but the awareness lingers in remembering. Sheer Grace!

September
Greetings, All:

The journey of Autumn's approach has begun to enter my senses: cool night air, night sounds, shifts in community activities and in learning communities, and the shortening of daylight. The phrase "the living daylight" is capturing my imagination. This summer, a directee was reflecting on a reading that invited her to pay attention to the 'living daylight' within.

Of course, some of us remember this term in more negative contexts. Yet, when I looked for how the phrase was originally used–for its more positive meaning–I learned that it expresses something of one's eyes–or, more fully, of one's whole being: The living daylights is an archaic idiom in English believed to be early 18th century slang for somebody's eyes that subsequently figuratively referred to all vital senses. (Thanks, Google.)

OK, of late, I have been prayerfully reflecting on two scriptures–words of Jesus and a prayer of Paul–that engage my inner and outer "vital senses," "the living daylight" of my life. I recognize that in the present cultural context and in the lives of those we companion, there seems to be a slow eclipse of the usual ways of seeing faith, hope, and love, leaving behind a longing for vision and vitality.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matthew 6:22–23 NIV). I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. (Ephesians 1:17–18 NRSV)

Now I have an "archaic idiom" to companion my thoughts and to deepen my awareness of "faith, hope and love" in the daily. Looking forward to "seeing" where this goes.

November
Greetings, All:

Watching the free fall
of once verdant leaves,
move through the bent light of an autumn sun,
brilliant visual,
fragrant in gathering.
Opens a deep lament of longing
of the greater possibility,
of tomorrow.
As prayers wander
in free fall likeness.
In moments, grace

Trust you are enjoying the splendor of these days of transition in the midst of the daily living.

January
Greetings, All:

As the days are now increasing in light, there is a perceptible nuanced awareness of a "shadow of turning." That is an interesting term in and of itself, but the reality is experiential–mostly. One morning during the deep freeze, I reluctantly (but needfully) arose before dawn to relight the fireplace. I love to watch the fire flames start small, and continue to grow as the logs finally come to full flame.

Once the fire was in fullness, I noticed the light of dawn evenly fill the room and the landscape just outside the west window beside my fireplace. (Remember, I live in Hopkins Gap between Little North Mt. [due east] and North Mt. [due west].) As the sun began to rise in the east, the west mountain top began to glow brightly. In the stillness of the moment, liquid light began traveling down the mountainside. In the wonder of that slow but steady movement, I noticed birds and deer moving as if animated by the light.

Then I noticed the room become perceptibly darker, illuminated now just by the fireplace and the descending 'reverse sunrise' light in the west. The sun was now casting a dark shadow into the gap because of the barrier made by the east mountain. Time seemed to slow even more, until at last the gap was filled with the liquid light in the fullness of day.

Did I mention? Up to that moment, I seemed to be in a several-days "funk," one that was not of the post-holiday-crash type. So much pain in the world, so much hate, so much division, so much killing of humans and creation–rooted in political and religious ideologies that blur the reality of the Holy who is present. So much . . . so much!

I continue to reflect on what shifted for me that day. Light is a wonderful metaphor, as is the dark. But maybe in the "so much" there is a steady "reverse sunrise" leading to a certain fullness and light-giving hope.

March
Greetings, All:

In my thoughts:

"They say that I am crazy
because I refuse to be crazy
the way everyone else is crazy."
–Peter Maurin

April
Greetings, All:

I had a comeback for the crazy quote in last month's email, from a colleague as crazy as me:

"The whole system of being human works
because we are not all crazy on the same day."
–Anne Lamott

My response: "Whose turn is it?"

August
Greetings, All:

I wonder if birds intentionally sing in harmony.

Over the course of the summer, I have intentionally paused from time to time just to listen. As I find myself a few years older, just engaging in this practice reminds me that there is a difference between "hard of listening" and "hard of hearing." Even though some tones are no longer accessible to my hearing, sounds still abound in almost every environment–so that listening becomes a choice. In order to learn discerned hearing, I am practicing not just noticing sound but hearing beyond the physiological.

In a summer morning's crowded field of multiple bird calls–I have counted more than fifteen on any given morning–intentionally hearing just one call against the variety of background sounds is not easy. There are a community of multiple voices in the ear. Similar voices echo back on the same theme but from a different location. The pattern of that one call fluctuates and varies. Yet, in time, my choice to listen deeply and singly becomes a way of intimacy, of hearing the deeper essence in the movement and seasons of life between listener and speaker. To borrow a phrase from John of the Cross, "Ah, the sheer grace."

Yes, I have come to believe that birds do intentionally sing in a harmonic way (at least those in Hopkins Gap). They remind me of the God who listens and invites me into discerned participation–to intentionally listen and hear the one sound of grace beneath it all.

About the author

Kevin Clark is a spiritual director in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

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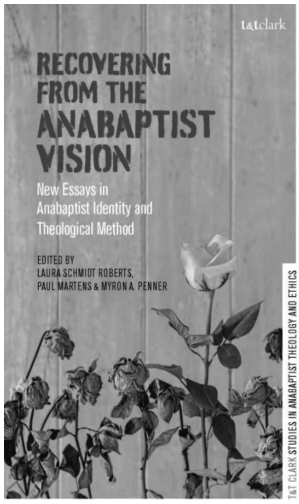

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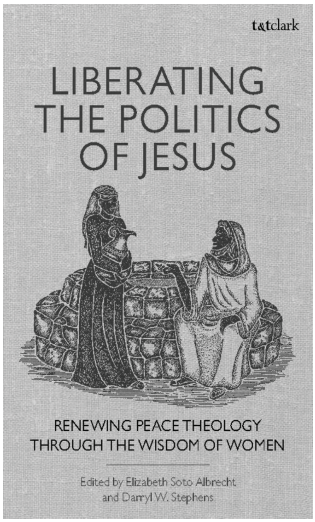

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