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Can Robots or Digital Persons Be Baptised into the Christian Faith? How AI Has Altered the Christian Perception and Experience of Christ

Lynda Cicely Airriess

Capstone Project for Master of Arts (Theology and Religion) (Feb 2026)

Abstract

This paper explores the issues associated with the initiation of non-biological humanoids into Christian communities. It does so by arguing that AI technologies support the transformation and/or abandonment of humanism, undermining the gospel message of salvation and radically altering the Christian perception and experience of Christ. It begins by asking the reader to consider if non-biological humanoids can or should be baptised. It focusses on demonstrating that AI is an integrative operative of two popular social movements, transhumanism (H+) and critical posthumanism (H-), that challenge the humanist landscape which has supported the Christian anthropocentric cosmos over the centuries. The paper is presented in two parts. The first part provides the necessary ideological context that facilitates the theological analysis presented in part two. To help maintain objectivity, the paper employs an *outsider* perspective of the issue and concludes that Christian leadership will need to choose between two broad approaches for the Christian message to survive in the digital world. They will need to either refocus their understanding of humans as a reflection of God towards the biological body and away from the intellect, or they will need to significantly alter Christian theology and teachings, creating a hypothetical AI Christ.

Introduction

Can robots or digital persons be baptised into the Christian faith? Should non-biological humanoids be initiated into the Christian faith? Is Christian salvation for humans

alone? What does it mean to be human in the 21st century? These are the questions that Christian leaders must respond to as humanity embraces artificial intelligence (AI). This digital technology is here to stay, and it is the harbinger of humanity's greatest modern transformation, a transformation that is being moulded by the ideologies of transhumanism and critical posthumanism. This essay argues that AI technologies support the transformation and/or abandonment of humanism, undermining the salvific gospel message by radically altering the Christian perception and experience of Christ. To meet this end, the essay is divided into two parts. Part I places AI in its supporting ideological contexts. It provides an overview of AI within the current Christian social context before outlining the key elements of transhumanism and critical posthumanism. Part II juxtapositions early and traditional Christianity against the ideologies of transhumanism and critical posthumanism. It also contrasts the reality of an AI digital world with Christ and considers two broad options for the future of Christianity within a digital landscape.

Part I: AI and Its Ideological Contexts

Problem Overview

Christianity has historically been viewed through a humanist lens. It is anthropocentric and considers how humanity can repair its perceived separation or estrangement from God. Christianity believes that humankind was created by God in God's own image. However, humanity erred, causing damage to their close kinship with God. In response, God sent his son Jesus, born of the human woman Mary to repair this disconnect. Thus, Christianity has always been a religion centred on the human condition. It is a religion for humans, and the rest of God's created order is viewed through a lens of a human hegemony. Therefore, it is not surprising that The Pew Research Center's research found that 73% of Americans believe that "AI should play no role in advising people about

their faith in God.”¹ However, these Americans will be disappointed to learn that AI is already advising people both directly and indirectly on matters of faith: from Google searches to AI generated Christian faith-music, and from AI authored sermons to the content and delivery of divinity college courses, AI is actively informing and shaping the Christian landscape, and this is only the beginning.

Currently the public discourse around AI focusses on large language models (LLMs), such as chatbots and content creation. AI generated newsfeeds are peppered with stories and articles on the negative effects of AI, including its effect on education and educational systems, human socialisation, and particularly the development of AI induced psychosis.² Yet regardless of the warnings, platonic and sexual relationships between human beings and chatbots are rapidly becoming more commonplace, and marriage to digital persons/chatbots companions is also on the rise.³ Spotify streams music that has been created and performed by AI identities, and this music has successfully been marketed to listeners.⁴ In addition, academics are learning to trust AI to streamline academic delivery and to influence the development of their own research and writing.⁵ Moreover, in the Christian context, ministers are beginning to rely on content creation models such as *SanctifyGPT* to help manage pastoral concerns and sermon preparation.⁶ In mere minutes, a minister can have a fully prepared sermon tailored to their own specific Christian tradition: Southern Baptist Convention, Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church (USA),

¹ Brian Kennedy, Eileen Yam, Emma Kikuchi, Isabelle Pula, and Javier Fuentes, “How Americans View AI and Its Impact on People and Society,” *Pew Research Center*, September 17, 2025, 9, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/09/PS_2025.9.15_AI-and-its-impact_report.pdf.

² Marlynn Wei, “The Emerging Problem of ‘AI Psychosis,’” *Psychology Today*, updated November 27, 2025, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/urban-survival/202507/the-emerging-problem-of-ai-psychosis>.

³ Amogh Dimri, “The People Who Marry Chatbots: A growing community is building a life with large language models,” *The Atlantic*, January 2, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/01/chatbot-marriage-ai-relationships-romance/685459/>.

⁴ Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, “The Current No. 1 Christian Artist Has No Soul,” *Christianity Today*, November 21, 2025, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/11/solomon-ray-ai-christian-music-soul-singer/>.

⁵ Matt Huffman, “What’s the Future? And is it all Artificial?,” *In Trust Center for Theological Studies*, Spring, 2025, <https://www.intrust.org/in-trust-magazine/spring-2025/whats-the-future-and-is-it-all-artificial>.

⁶ *SanctifyGPT*, last accessed on February 20, 2026, <https://www.sanctifygpt.io/>.

Catholic Church,⁷ United Methodist Church, and Pentecostal Churches. *SanctifyGPT* insists that their theological content is “vetted by seminary-trained scholars and pastoral experts,” and that “Every sermon is generated in grounded biblical truth and sound exegesis.”⁸ An overworked clergy may find it hard to resist such a temptation, and AI was created to make human lives easier and better. It was born to help humanity take its next evolutionary step into a digitally transformed social landscape.

The Transhumanist and the Critical Posthumanist Landscape

Christian theology has been reshaped and reformed by humanity’s social and philosophical ideologies throughout history. Since its earliest days of reconciling the gospel message with Neo-Platonism, Christianity has had to wrestle to reconcile its gospel message with the ideological lifeways of human societies.⁹ Its success was made possible by an almost universal support for anthropocentrism, and anthropocentrism is the foundational concept of Western humanism. Although humanism began as a medieval ecclesial movement rooted in classical inquiry, by the 19th and 20th century it became the stronghold of rational secular thought.¹⁰ Nevertheless, due to a shared conceptual lexicon and anthropocentric focus, Christianity withstood the changing nature of humanism and retained its dominant religious position within Western society. However, by the mid-20th century, humanism’s ideological influence began to wane, and as it did, so did Christianity’s status.

Currently, humanism has been almost completely replaced by two different ideological perspectives in Western society: transhumanism and critical posthumanism.

⁷ *SanctifyGPT*, please note that this category does not specify Roman Catholicism, only noting that it is “Respectful of Catholic teachings.” This contrasts to the Southern Baptist Convention category’s statement “Trusted by SBC pastors nationwide,” and the United Methodist Church statement, “Wesleyan tradition approved.”

⁸ *SanctifyGPT*, main page.

⁹ Robert Doede, “From Living Souls to Software Selves: The Movements of Enchantment through Western Metaphysics,” in *Human Flourishing in a Technological World: A Theological Perspective*, ed. by Jens Zimmermann (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2023), 39-42, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁰ Robert Doede, “From Living Souls to Software Selves,” 36.

Although, these two approaches differ significantly and often view each other as adversaries, in their most basic forms they both strongly approve of Nietzsche's statement "God is dead ... And we have killed him"¹¹ – in its most literal interpretation.¹² However, they approach the demise of the divine differently. Transhumanism (H+)¹³ believes that the human triumph over the divine has been achieved by supercharging or transforming the human body through the use of advanced pharmaceuticals and technologies. It maintains an anthropocentric outlook, but this view is enhanced to the point that any notion of God is eclipsed. It could be argued that H+ is the natural successor of humanism. On the other hand, critical posthumanism (H-) views the situation differently. It believes that the demise of God is achieved by blurring the false conceptual distinctions between human and non-human categories. However, both H+ and H- are powered by a digital worldview that is hostile to the survival of the Christianity.

At its onset, H+ was most often viewed as a fringe movement. It appeared to be built upon an improbable science fiction ideology that flourished after WWII, and its utopian vision seemed unrealistic to many. Nonetheless, it had some academic support, and its early noteworthies included literary elites such as H.G. Wells.¹⁴ However, the message of early H+ seemed to only echo long-established secular talking points that were generally ignored due to their inability to address social guidance or morality.¹⁵ However, the rapid

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science (The Joyful Wisdom)*, translated by Thomas Common (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 79, https://archive.org/details/isbn_9781420934212/page/4/mode/2up.

¹² Brian Leiter, "The Death of God and the Death of Morality," *The Monist* 102, no. 3 (2019), 389-390, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26863560>. In this paper later explains that this reference is taken out of context, as Nietzsche proclamation was meant to be a warning that without religion, society risks becoming immoral.

¹³ The abbreviations H+ and H- will now be used throughout the paper. These abbreviations provide a convenient short form, and they reinforce how these ideologies relate to humanism. Transhumanism seeks to enhance humanism, whereas critical posthumanism seeks to reduce the humanist ideological framework. This usage draws from Robert Doede's use of the abbreviation H+ in reference to transhumanism in: Robert Doede, "From Living Souls to Software Selves," 34. Also, to avoid confusion, it must be noted that H+ often uses the term *posthuman* in their discourse; however, this usage is general and can refer to any type of futuristic transformed human body. This use should not be confused with the ideology of H-. See: Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism: Techno-Human Evolution and Advanced Capitalism*, 1st ed. (Bristol University Press, 2024), 25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.14284473>.

¹⁴ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 8-9.

¹⁵ Michael Baggot, L.C., "The Daring and Disappointing Dreams of Transhumanism's Secular Eschatology," *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2024), 850, <https://archive.stpaulcenter.com/06-nv-22-3-baggot/>.

pace of technological advancements in the late 20th and early 21st centuries suddenly transformed yesterday's science fiction into today's realities. For example, HAL 9000, the fictional sentient artificial general intelligence (AGI) model that wreaks havoc on the *Discovery One* in the 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*,¹⁶ will likely be an everyday technology in the very near future, as many predict that AGI will be available within five years (2030).¹⁷

Thus, H+ is no longer a fringe movement. Instead, it has become an ideology central to modern philosophical discourse, and it is aggressively promoted by the world's leading economic elites. Elon Musk, Jeffery Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg all avow the H+ creed, and these Silicon Valley titans wield a disproportional amount of social influence.¹⁸ Together and in competition with one another, they have engineered a global technological and social context that disseminates H+'s three super-goals: super-intelligence, super longevity, and super happiness.¹⁹ However, the H+ message is often linked with misogyny, hyper-masculinity, racism, and hyper-capitalistic oligarchism, features that are associated with the overall *tech bro* identity.²⁰

Yet, H+ is also broad-based and contains many subdivisions and factions within it that help distance it from its *tech bro* identity. For example, political and even Christian H+ alignments have been established.²¹ Yet, in its most fundamental form, H+ is often described as consisting of only two primary approaches: *biological based* and *silicon based*. A biological H+ approach seeks to direct human longevity via pharmaceutical and/or genetic engineering advances, whereas a silicon approach advocates for technological approaches to solve this problem. Still, via the application of AI, the two approaches have increasingly begun to overlap and become one. For example, AI (silicon based) combined with genetic engineering (biological based) is used to enhance the

¹⁶ Stanley Kubrik, dir., *2001: A Space Odyssey* (MGM, 1968).

¹⁷ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 15-16.

¹⁸ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 20.

¹⁹ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 2.

²⁰ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 27.

²¹ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 20. See also: World Transhumanist Association/Humanity+, last accessed on February 20, 2026, <https://www.humanityplus.org/>; and Christian Transhumanist Association, last accessed on February 20, 2026, <https://www.christiantranshumanism.org/>.

diagnosis and treatment of neurological conditions such as autism spectrum disorder and dementia.²² Given that no one wants to live with an illness, condition, or disorder, medical treatments powered by AI project an H+ image of an ethical good life. Yet, all is not as it seems, as AI driven technological approaches are rife with ethical concerns.

When the cost of expensive AI driven medical procedures confronts H+, humanitarianism is threatened. Although humanism and humanitarianism should not be confused, humanitarianism can be described as the benevolent heart of humanism, and this position should extend to H+. Yet, the costly AI driven medical procedures favoured by H+ challenge humanitarianism by widening the social gap between the rich and the poor. For example, the high price tag of procedures and equipment means that advanced technological treatment methods are only available to those who can afford them, increasing the social division between the rich and the poor. This could occur to the point that it creates two distinct categories of human physical forms: human bodies enhanced by technology and those who are purely biologically based. Thus, the ultra-rich will have the opportunity to become a race of superhumans; however, the poor or average person will remain entirely biological.²³

Also, many of these high-tech procedures *play God*, as advanced technologies can often be removed or terminated on demand. For example, the biopharmaceutical company Merck genetically modified the memory-intelligence of a test group of mice, but once the modification was terminated, the mice lost their super-intelligence.²⁴ When applied to humans, this creates a dangerous inequality between the supplier and the receiver. For example, a genetic modification that produces human super-intelligence could be withdrawn, causing the recipient loss of employment, personal memories, or life. Therefore, although H+ promises only a superior transformed good, and technology has

²² Meetali Kalani and Ashish Anjankar, "Revolutionizing Neurology: The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Advancing Diagnosis and Treatment," *Cureus* 16(6) (2024) <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11224934/>.

²³ M.J. McNamee and S. D. Edwards, "Transhumanism, Medical Technology and Slippery Slopes," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 32, no. 9 (2006): 514-515. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27719694>.

²⁴ Brian Alexander, *How Biotech Became the New Religion* (Basic Books, 2003), 246, <https://archive.org/details/rapturehowbiotec0000alex/mode/2up>.

already improved the lives of many, it also creates a set of dangerous social contradictions that undermines the humanitarian component of humanism. This is a trait H+ shares with H-.

H- also undermines humanitarianism by overtly diminishing the value of human life. H- is a strong rejection of anthropocentric humanism and considers the category of *human* as a social construct. It argues that the idea of human evolutionary dominance was artificially created by humans through the institution of self-serving binary divisions and cognitive dissonance.²⁵ To remedy this and advance humankind towards its next evolutionary phase, H- advocates for a blending of the core binary divisions that separate humans from all other forms of matter and social divisions. For example, H- strives to blur the division between human and animal, physical and non-physical, and human and machine.²⁶

Overall, H- is considered less organised than H+, but it is very socially persuasive and has strong academic support. In addition, its move away from an anthropocentric worldview has already significantly re-shaped western thought. Moreover, it must be noted that while some of the social changes delivered by H- produce real ethical challenges and social tension, other changes have been benign, and some have brought compassionate transformations to the Western world. For example, the blurring between life and death (physical and non-physical) has often led to significant serious ethical challenges when assessing applicants for medically assisted suicide. Conversely, the social shift towards pet parenthood from pet ownership (animal and human) is more benign, and the triumph of gender theory has led to the development of more compassionate and inclusive societies. Thus, similar to H+, H- is not devoid of any merit, much positive social change has resulted from the integration of H- into our societies. Also, some H- scholars are reluctant to fully discard humanism, believing that maintaining a sliver of anthropocentrism in modern societies helps to mitigate genocides and other humanitarian disasters.²⁷ Nevertheless, both ideological frameworks have core structural defeats that undermine

²⁵ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 28.

²⁶ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 27.

²⁷ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 26.

humanitarianism, and many of these are the result of blurring the category of human and machine via AI technologies.

It is the H- blurring or blending of human and machine that creates an overlap between itself and H+. This overlap is easily demonstrated as millions of humans speak to their Alexa device every day. This early voice-to-voice AI personal assistant was created and marketed by acutely H+ friendly Amazon; however, it also supports the tenets of H- as it demonstrates how a pure machine can present as human. Moreover, the Transhumanist Party's "Transhumanist Bill of Rights," a document that seeks to provide protections and rights for 'sentient entities,' also demonstrates the overlap between H+ and H- in a list of entities it wishes to protect under law. These include: i) genetically modified humans, ii) cyborgs, iii) digital intelligences, iv) intellectually enhanced, previously non-sapient animals, v) any species of plant or animal which has been enhanced to possess the capacity for intelligent thought, and vi) other advanced sapient life forms.²⁸ Thus, H- and H+ may not be as ideologically opposed as they consider themselves to be. Advanced digital technologies help to facilitate the blending between the categories of human and machine by seamlessly merging the two, thereby softening H-'s view of H+ as "techno-masculinist," and a "blissed-out techno-idiot."²⁹ AI creates a common ground between the two social movements.

In fact, Manfredi Negro, a researcher on human enhancement and the ethics of artificial intelligence argues that although H+ and H- seem divergent, they converge on several main points. He reasons that they illustrate an example of ideological convergent evolution, evolving independently in response to similar conditions that have resulted in similar adaptations. Thus, if H+ is imagined as an orca and H- as a shark, it is apparent that the two share a similar overall form that helps them to navigate their aquatic environment. For example, an orca and a shark both rely on a dorsal fin to swim upright, and H- and H+ threaten humanism by contending that humans are not good enough. Without a hint of disagreement, both H- and H+ favour the 'better, stronger, faster' bionic man of

²⁸ Zoltan Istvan and the U.S. Transhumanist Party, "Transhumanist Bill of Rights – 3.0," last accessed on February 20, 2026, <https://transhumanist-party.org/tbr-3/>.

²⁹ Alexander Thomas, *The Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*, 27.

yesteryear³⁰ or Demerzel, the AGI gynoid or female presenting humanoid robot of today's popular culture.³¹

In addition, H+ and H- share another similar trait, their denunciation of religion. Yet, both often borrow from religious culture to promote their views and create a religiosity for themselves.³² Brian Alexander demonstrates this in his book *Rapture: How Biotech Became the New Religion*.³³ He argues that the use of religious language to describe their beliefs reveal that they are the new religions of the 21st century. Alexander is particularly focussed on H+'s adaptation of Christian imagery and language to promote their ideology. For example, his use of 'rapture' in the book title cleverly demonstrates that the H+ promise of a digital new life is similar to the Christian Evangelical idea of the righteous avoiding death by directly ascending to heaven at the Parousia. Thus, H+ and H- do not destroy religious thought; instead, they have adapted it and adopted it to build a new faith culture.

Yet, the link created between H+ and H- and religion is not confined to the new borrowing language from the old. Conversely, digital language is often applied to human bodies in all segments of Western society on a regular basis. For example, the modern English vernacular regularly refers to a person with a specific dominate characteristic as being *hardwired* to display that trait. The often-unspoken result of this is to consider all other human behaviours as software. Thus, western society is beginning to spontaneously re-construct the argument of nature vs nurture as firmware vs software. Other everyday examples of digital language applied to the human body include referencing a person's conscious memory as random-access memory (RAM) or speaking of a person in micro-socialisations, such as flight attendant, as a non-playing character (NPC). However, the use of the term *avatar*, a Hindu term applied to an incarnated form of a deity in order to

³⁰ Kenneth Johnson, producer, *The Six Million Dollar Man* (Universal Television, 1974-1978).

³¹ David S. Goyer, Josh Friedman, David Ellison, Dana Goldberg, and Marcy Ross, producers, *Foundation* (Apple TV+, 2021 -).

³² Michael Baggot, "The Daring and Disappointing Dreams of Transhumanism's Secular Eschatology," *Nova et Vetera*, Summer 2024 (Vol. 22, No. 3), 842-844, <https://archive.stpaulcenter.com/06-nv-22-3-baggot/>

³³ Brian Alexander, *Rapture: How Biotech Became the New Religion* (Basic Books, 2003), <https://archive.org/details/rapturehowbiotec0000alex/mode/2up>.

vanquish an evil, clearly demonstrates the blending of religious and digital language.³⁴ Moreover, the application of digital language onto the human body and experience leads to an implicit reconstruction on how the human body and its death is perceived in the current social milieu, as well as in the Christian tradition.

Part II: AI and Jesus Christ

Death and Salvation

A central aspect of many religions, including Christianity, is to address the ultimate enemy of the human condition – its fear of death. Researchers believe that human death anxiety is universal and that religions function to help mitigate this fear.³⁵ Unsurprisingly, H+ and H- share this function:³⁶ H+ by extending life via technology and H- by seeking “to reframe death education as a diffractive rather than reflexive practice.”³⁷ In contrast, Christianity promises believers a *new* resurrected life. This promised new life is the foundation of early and traditional Christian views of salvation. Early and traditional Christians believe that everyone living will eventually die, but those who follow Christ will be resurrected in the new life at the Second Coming of Christ to live again in the glory of God. They will be reconciled in love with the Creator. They will be saved. However, without Christ, the soul or consciousness of the deceased slips off into the shadowy underworld, the realm of the dead: Shaol in the ancient Jewish context or Hades in the ancient Greek worldview.

³⁴ Francesca Ferrando, “The Posthuman Divine: When Robots Can Be Enlightened,” *Sophia* 58 (2019), 650, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-019-00753-9>.

³⁵ Apurva-Kumar Pandya and Tripti Kathuria, “Death Anxiety, Religiosity and Culture: Implications for Therapeutic Process and Future Research,” *Religions* 12, no. 1 (2021): 61, sec. 3.3, 3.5, and 3.8, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/death-anxiety-religiosity-culture-implications/docview/2479325202/se-2>.

³⁶ Philip D. Bunn, “Silicon Valley Stoics? Life-Hacking, Transhumanism, and Stoic Therapy,” *The Political Science Reviewer* 46, no. 1 (May 10, 2022): 6, <https://politicalsciencereviewer.com/index.php/psr/article/view/677>.

³⁷ Juliette Clara Bertoldo, “Reconsidering Death Education in/for the Anthropocene from a Posthumanist Approach,” *Death Studies*, May 1–15 (2025), 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010061>.

In the time before Christ, the underworld was not envisioned as place that was exclusively reserved for the punishment of the unjust. Instead, the underworld was simply the dismal depths of death that awaited us all,³⁸ and it is unlikely that most people looked forward to this end-of-life experience. In Book XI of the *Odessey*, Homer describes Odysseus's visit to the land of Hades.³⁹ It is a world where the silent shades of both everyday people and the heroic mingle about in darkness, only temporarily regaining conscious to speak to Odysseus via the transformational power of sacrificial blood.⁴⁰ However, there is no rejoicing of souls in the land of the dead.

The understanding of life after death changes with Christ. With the advent of Christ, a better after-death option is available for those who have ears to listen.⁴¹ Sadly, in the Christian context, those who refuse to listen will be filled with intense regret. Thus, the belief in Heaven or the Kingdom of God creates a dichotomy that transforms woeful Hades into a penal Hell. The desolate, miserable default land of the dead becomes a place of punishment in the light of a better option. This is demonstrated by Jesus' explanation of the parable of the *Weeds of the Field* in the Gospel of Matthew.⁴² Jesus explains that at the end of the age those who have not repented or changed their ways (evildoers) will be destroyed in a manner similar to the method used by a farmer to destroy weeds at harvest time. The weeds are thrown into a fiery furnace (killed) and cast into the miserable land of the dead. The evildoers are immediately filled with an intense regret leading to a "weeping and

³⁸ Bo Reicke, "Hell," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford University Press, 1993), 277.

³⁹ Homer, "Book XI," in *The Odyssey*, trans. Walter Shewring (Oxford University Press, 2008), 128-142. Also, like Judaic belief, Homeric cosmology could be complex, and ancient Greek religious thought does reflect that there were different levels in the underworld. For example, below the realm of the shades, in the deepest darkest level, Tantalos and other dangerous entities were imprisoned. For a discussion of Homer's Hades see: Nannó Marinatos, "The So-Called Hell and Sinners in the Odyssey and Homeric Cosmology," *Numen* 56, no. 2/3 (2009): 185-97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27793789>.

⁴⁰ Homer also makes room for the Elysium Fields, an after-death paradise only available to a select and very distinguished small group of heroes most often associated with Trojan war. See Book IV, 48. However, the concept of the Elysium Fields is generally believed to be more poetic and less widespread in ancient Greek religious thought and/or folk belief. See: "Elysium," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, ed. John Roberts, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 254.

⁴¹ Matthew (paraphrase) 13.43b "let anyone with ears listen!" (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

⁴² Matthew 13.36-43 (NRSVCE).

gnashing of teeth;”⁴³ however, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father.”⁴⁴ Therefore, the salvation of Christ exists on the other side of death.

Thus, the gospel message of salvation cannot be reconciled with either H+ or H- without skewing its original or scriptural meaning. However, the precursor of H+ and H-, modern humanism, was able to maintain a conceptual space for the Christian idea of salvation because it does not question the dichotomy of life and death. The same cannot be said for either H+ or H-, as the former does accept the certainty of death, and the latter refuses to recognise life and death as distinct, differing categories. However, the relationship of death and salvation is not the only core principle of traditional Christianity that is irreconcilable with H+ and H-. Another major point of contention is the Christian belief that humanity is created in the image of God.⁴⁵

The Image of God

Christian teaching has long associated human intelligence with the image of God, and human intelligence is most often associated with the world of science. The Vatican document *Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence*,⁴⁶ begins by stating that “The Christian tradition regards the gift of intelligence as an essential aspect of how humans are created ‘in the image of God’ (Gen. 1:27).”⁴⁷ Yet, it also states “Since AI lacks the richness of corporeality, relationality, and the openness of the human heart to truth and goodness, its capacities – though seemingly limitless – are incomparable with the human ability to grasp reality.”⁴⁸ Thus, the association

⁴³ Matthew 13.42 (NRSVCE).

⁴⁴ Matthew 13.43a (NRSVCE).

⁴⁵ Genesis 1.26-27 (NRSVCE). Note that Christianity shares this belief with its antecedent, Judaism.

⁴⁶ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education, *Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence*, (Holy See, 2025), Bk. I, Sec.1, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html.

⁴⁷ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Antiqua et Nova*, “II: What is Artificial Intelligence,” Sec.9.

⁴⁸ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Antiqua et Nova*, “III: Intelligence in the Philosophical and Theological Tradition,” Sec.33.

between the divine and the human form may not be limited to the human intellect or ability to reason, but to its physicality and biological being as well.

Jesus Christ shares humanity's physical and biological being. Christians believe that he is the son of God, but also that he was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilot, was crucified, died, and buried.⁴⁹ Thus, the divinity of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from his incarnation nor from his human physical and biological form, strengthening the connection between the biological human body and the image of God. However, although H+ can accept the humanity of Christ and H- can appreciate a blended nature, neither ideology supports a belief of a supernatural divine force, and therefore the human form cannot reflect this supernatural force. Thus, the Christian perception of both Christ and humanity is drastically altered if Christ is reformulated to fit within the ideological constructs of either H+ or H-, as the bond between Christ, humanity, and God is lost. This action creates confusion in traditional Christian theology, resulting in an artificial Christ. It creates an AI Christ: a Christ that is neither divine nor human.

The idea of an AI Christ seems reminiscent of a phenomenon known as Christian robot-phobia. The history of Christian robot-phobia extends back to the very beginning of mechanical and technological development. In his article, "The Icon and the Idol: A Christian Perspective on Social Robots," Jordan Joseph Wales argues that this fear is the result of the Christian view of a synonymous relationship between the concepts of personhood and self-gift. Wales explains that in the Christian view digital-companions pervert the notion of self-gift, and "the robot [becomes] not a recipient of my love but an idolatrous instrument of my self-referential satisfaction."⁵⁰ Wales examines not only modern perspectives but explores how modern fears duplicate medieval anxieties of automata, and he reasons that the personification of any mechanic or digital identity lacks wisdom.

⁴⁹ This is an allusion to *The Apostles' Creed* – a faith statement core to many Christian traditions.

⁵⁰ Jordan Joseph Wales, "The Icon and the Idol: A Christian Perspective on Social Robots," in *Human Flourishing in a Technological World: A Theological Perspective*, edited by Jens Zimmermann (Oxford University Press, 2023), 149, ProQuest Ebook Central.

The AI Christ

However, AI Christ might exceed notions of robot-phobia. In today's digital world the concept of an AI Christ is more believable than a human Jesus Christ. The AI Christ abides in our contemporary reality and is constantly at our side ready help. The AI Christ can explain everything. Humanity no longer has to live with the unexplainable 'only God knows' – humans can now Google away their ignorance.⁵¹ In addition, the AI Christ does not need a human body: AI Christ will never suffer and die on the cross, freeing it and humanity from the human condition, the *valley of tears*, and religion. However, Kimbell Kornu argues that it is through suffering that Christ and Christians are truly transfigured or deified. Kornu writes, "the power that the transfigured corporate body wields is power-in-weakness" and that "while suffering is not an intrinsic good, suffering is a transfiguring means by which the intrinsic good of divine filiation makes us fully human in a divine mode of existing."⁵² However, most will counter argue that suffering is anti-humanitarian and often leads to death; therefore, it should be avoided at all costs, and AI Christ achieves this goal.

AI Christ placates the fear of death by offering a digital alternative to the concept of everlasting life. It can fulfill the H+ answer to salvation by providing an everlasting life to anyone who has the means to upload their consciousness to the digital universe.⁵³ Death is forever defeated without ever having to leave the planetary norm or lose consciousness for even a moment. In addition, it achieves the aims of H- by extending the idea of personhood to those without a biological form. Thus, AI Christ eliminates the sloppy aspects of our biological existence in favour of the clean machine. Nevertheless, the rejection of the messy and inconvenient human body creates a few ideological contradictions. For example, the desire to separate from the messiness of our biological bodies undermines the super happiness experienced by our biological bodies, in opposition to the enhanced wellbeing promised by both H+ and H-.⁵⁴ AI Christ may be missing something.

⁵¹ Francesca Ferrando, 648.

⁵² Kimbell Kornu, "Transfiguration, Not Transhumanism; Suffering as Human Enhancement," *The Heythrop Journal* 63 (2022), 935-936, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.14129>.

⁵³ Robert Doede, 34.

⁵⁴ Michael Baggot, 844.

Although AI Christ is missing something, it is rapidly becoming the more popular messiah. The absence of a physical form seems inconsequential, making it fully compatible with 21st century digital cosmology and the H+ and H- universe of ideas. AI Christ is neither species nor gender specific. It holds scientific fact as the cosmological truth, and it regards the miraculous and paranormal as non-real experiences or flights of fancy. Moreover, the AI Christ does not require its adherents to go to church or commit acts of self-sacrifice – being helpful and pleasant is enough.

In contrast to the Christian experience, AI Christ offers a user-friendly, individualised salvation that is not connected to the ecclesiastical Body of Christ. For example, in their article “In Tech We Trust? On Salvation through Technology,” Joaquin Menach and Llorenç Puig-Puig draw from scholarship of modern theological giants such as Jürgen Moltmann, Rudolph Bultmann, and Leonardo Boff, to argue that Christian salvation is not an individual pursuit, but rather that it is achieved in the fullness of communion with the other, and that it “extends to all generations of human begins, past, present, and future.”⁵⁵ They state that although “transhumanism acknowledges the importance of social concern ... the focus on personal wellbeing remains central.”⁵⁶ Yet, even though AI Christ may suffer from an underdeveloped social vision, its focus on individual well-being remains more popular in the 21st century.

A Way Forward for Christianity

Thus, in the shadow of AI Christ, 1st century Jesus Christ seems antiquated and out of place. His focus on an anthropocentric salvation, belief in miracles, and insistence on God as father are not sympatico with today’s values.⁵⁷ Therefore, even though Christianity has stayed relevant throughout the centuries by flexing its theology to fit its social context, it may have reached its limits. Nietzsche should be redacted for the times to read “The

⁵⁵ Joaquin Menacho and Llorenç Puig-Puig, “In Tech We Trust? On Salvation through Technology,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 60:3 (2025), 688, <https://doi.org/10.16995/zygon.16878>.

⁵⁶ Joaquin Menacho, “In Tech We Trust?” 688.

⁵⁷ Francesca Ferrando, 646.

anthropocentric world is dead, and it took God with it.” Through the lens of the death of humanism, it appears that the only way to salvage an authentic and robust Christian message is to reconsider how humans relate to the divine and make room for non-scientific knowledge. Plausibly, the human relationship to the divine is better understood via biology, physical experience, and traditional knowledge frameworks that are unique to our biological beings – these are the human attributes exclusive to the human identity.

However, to reconsider the human relationship to the divine without defaulting to AI Christ, will be a challenge for Christianity. As noted earlier, Christianity has often refashioned itself in order to better serve its social context. However, humans are no longer alone, and this changes everything. The only way to compete with the AI Christ is to not compete with it. The problem with AI/AGI is that it can do most everything with more speed and accuracy than its human counterpart – the one exception is that humans are still better at being human. Thus, Christians should embrace what AI Christ is not. Humans are biological, empathetical, and can operate on a supernatural plain free from the constraints of empirical knowledge. Humans can experience and believe in miracles. To ensure the survival of an authentic traditional Christianity, Christians should consider breaking away from the cosmos of secular society and move towards traditional cosmologies and knowledge frameworks that create space for the supernatural. This approach recognises and respects a world that Jesus Christ was very comfortable and at home in. Scripture reinforces this idea. Jesus walks on water and informs that others can do so to if they believe.⁵⁸ Jesus Christ does not ask his disciples to believe in an artificial or augmented reality – instead he asks his disciples to believe in a reality beyond the realm of human knowledge.

To locate Christianity firmly in the biological human person of Jesus Christ and the supernatural person of God, will result in a salvation that excludes non-biological humanoids. Marius Dorobantu reaches a similar conclusion in his article, “Could Robots

⁵⁸ Matthew 14.22 – 33, Mark 6.45-52, and John 6.16 -21(NRSVCE).

Become Religious? Theological, Evolutionary, and Cognitive Perspectives;”⁵⁹ however, Dorobantu’s conclusion is based on a cognitive perspective. He believes that the exclusion of non-biological humanoids from Christianity should be due to the fact that they think differently and cannot nor will not want to embrace religiosity. Dorobantu says, “AI is a very different type of entity, and in the future, it might become even less humanlike.”⁶⁰ However, Dorobantu also believes that from a contemporary theological perspective the inclusion of non-biological humanoids may be logical, saying that “such an attitude might be warranted.”⁶¹

Thus, excluding non-biological humanoids from their faith communities may be problematic for contemporary Christian groups that focus on panentheism and theologies of inclusiveness. As mentioned above, inclusive H+ contemporary Christian organisations have already been established, and Benedikt Paul Göcke, discusses the similarities between contemporary Christianity and H+ in his article, “Panentheism, Transhumanism, and the Problem of Evil: From Metaphysics to Ethics.”⁶² Göcke considers panentheism as a metaphysical theory and believes that Christians “should engage in the transhumanist agenda to enhance the well-being of human beings and the world surrounding them to contribute to the realization of the good and beautiful.” Nevertheless, Göcke does not specifically address the problem of non-biological humanoids, their baptism, nor their salvation. However, Göcke does state that he also believes that “we are therefore free to change the biological nature of man” and that “for the first time in its history, humanity has reached ... a stage of scientific development enabling it to actively intervene in the course of its own biological evolution.”⁶³ In addition to this, Göcke makes reference to a 2014 remark from Pope Francis regarding the baptism of extra-terrestrial life. In a homily, the

⁵⁹ Marius Dorobantu, “Could Robots Become Religious? Theological, Evolutionary, and Cognitive Perspectives,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 59 (3) (2024): 768–787, <https://doi.org/10.16995/zygon.16902>.

⁶⁰ Dorobantu, “Could Robots Become Religious,” 781.

⁶¹ Dorobantu, “Could Robots Become Religious,” 783.

⁶² Benedikt Paul Göcke, “Panentheism, Transhumanism, and the Problem of Evil: From Metaphysics to Ethics,” *European Journal For Philosophy of Religion* Vol 11, No 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i2.2971>.

⁶³ Göcke, “Panentheism, Transhumanism, and the Problem of Evil,” 79.

pope remarked that if a Martian should ask to be baptised, it probably should be done so as not to go against the force of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ However, Pope Francis's remarks should *not* be used as evidence of support for the baptism of non-biological lifeforms, as Pope Francis's hypothetical and hyperbolic remark was given in the context of welcoming and caring for immigrants and others who are referred to as aliens.⁶⁵ Also, given the publication of the *Antique et Nova* previously cited,⁶⁶ it is unlikely he would have endorsed the baptism of an AI entity. In a traditional Christian view, it is not feasible to reconcile the inclusion of non-biological humanoids into faith communities, and in a contemporary Christian view, it is not easy to exclude them.

Conclusion

Thus, the digital age asks Christians to alter their traditional perception and experience of Christ away from its scriptural base and its humanistic framework. Jesus is no longer a saviour as salvation is no longer necessary in a world void of death or in a world that abhors the anthropocentrism of humans as reflections of the highest order. Thus, even though Christianity has a long history of adapting its theology to fit its social context, adjusting it to fit into a H+ or H- world that has abandoned humanism is unrealistic, and Christians must decide between two possible broad-based reactions: one for traditional communities and another for contemporary communities. The traditional option is to move away from equating human intelligence and scientific knowledge with the image of God and relocating it closer to the biological incarnational form of Christ. A contemporary option is to abandon the real, physical body and replace it with an acceptance of a digital reality, an AI Christ, that has replaced the physical one. Inevitably, in the near future, Christian leaders will be asked to baptise, confirm, marry, or bury robots or other non-biological humanoids, and they need to be prepared. They need to be able determine the

⁶⁴ Dorobantu, "Could Robots Become Religious," 783.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Dias, "For Pope Francis, It's About More than Martians," *Time*, May 14, 2014, <https://time.com/99616/for-pope-francis-its-about-more-than-martians/>.

⁶⁶ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Antiqua et Nova*, "V: Specific Questions," sec.58-63.

effects of the request on their own faith and the faith of the community they serve. They need to look at the *big picture* and locate the request within their individual and denominational ideologies and theologies. They need to consider if the action supports their Christian belief or undermines their faith in Jesus Christ.

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Journal #5: Our Path to the Future

Phillip Breden

For PT/CH 2005 Indigenous Culture and History (June 2025)

“What can we do about it?” Euro-Canadians often ask regarding reconciliation, as said by Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Murray Sinclair (2018). For some non-Indigenous, the concept of reconciliation may seem very overwhelming, and people will not know how to begin the journey. Some might think or say something similar to the quote above in response to hearing the stories of residential schools or Canadian history from an Indigenous perspective. However, what people need to realize is that by hearing the stories of Indigenous people we have already begun the reconciliation journey—by listening, feeling, and processing our emotions and reactions. By beginning our journey with listening, Euro-Canadians can participate in the healing process of all Canadians—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—by learning about the atrocities of history and admitting such acts are wrong (Frideres, page 89). As much as Indigenous voices have been silenced throughout history, they are gaining momentum and volume. Such historical voices are sometimes both verbal and action-based, such as the political involvement and raising of arms that led to the birth of the Métis nation (Belanger, page 157). Indeed, the Métis voice has been active throughout Canadian history and has helped shape the history of both their people and Canada itself (Kolisnyk, 2025). The relatively recent awareness of the depths and horrors of the residential schools as led to much truth telling, the rise of Indigenous voice, and an awareness within the public sphere.

This rise in public awareness has led to many people beginning their part of reconciliation by listening, including myself. Several years ago, I accepted an invitation to join other non-Indigenous folk to listen to two Okanagan Syilx elders tell their Nation’s history, including experiences about the residential schools and 60’s scoop. Hearing these stories fueled a desire within me to participate in Truth and Reconciliation. Although I began to share what I learned, I wasn’t sure how else to continue.

One of the responses to the terrors of residential schools was an increase of Indigenous voice and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 94 Calls to Action. Released in 2008, this led to opportunities for Indigenous people to tell their stories and give the world an Indigenous perspective on history (Frideres, 76-77). When asked about reconciliation, Murray Sinclair responded that “reconciliation is inevitable,” but what is important is “what kind of relationship do we have?” (2018). His meaning is that by non-Indigenous and Indigenous people engaging in the 94 Calls to Action, we can walk the journey of reconciliation together and build a better future, one of positive relationship. This is a continued answer to the question of “what can we do?” As discussed today in class, we cannot simply let the Calls to Action gather dust in the closet, but we need to find something within the 94 actions that we can resonate with and live out (Kolisnyk, 2025). These are ways that Indigenous people can continue to use their voice and for allies to help.

There are other ways Indigenous people are utilizing their voice for a better future and healing alongside the Calls to Action. People are getting involved in their community and culture, participating in politics, sharing stories of their experience, and even some are storytelling through art, such as music (Kolisnyk, 2025). Modern conventions are also a powerful tool for Indigenous people to connect and use their voice. Despite its addictive qualities and tendency to produce “brain rot,” social media can be used to publicize Indigenous issues and mobilize people nationally, such as the case with Bill C-45 (Belanger, page 407). Moreover, it can be a public forum in which people can engage in conversation about reconciliation (Belanger, page 408). Because these are located within the public sphere and are increasingly used, Indigenous voices are being heard.

Finally, I think to the future, and about what I can do to continue my journey in reconciliation. The first thing I can do is continue to listen. We are encouraged to not rush through the truth telling portion and rush toward reconciliation (Kolisnyk, 2025). It is important to hear the stories and engage with those emotions. I have heard residential school stories a few times, and each experience is unique in the hearing and feeling. Additional questions were brought up in class: Which of the 94 Calls to Action are being

lived out in my community? How can I get involved? Are there Elders who may be invited to speak to my Community of Faith? As I am moving to a new community in August, I look ahead to whose land will soon be my home. The lands surrounding Agassiz are home to several First Nation bands including the Sq'ewqel (Seabird Island First Nation). Upon visiting the website of the Sq'ewqel, I have learned that they are very involved in journeying into the future. They utilize their voice on social media, and they are an active part of the community, working with others for the benefit of all who live in the region (Seabird Island Band, 2025). With all this in mind, it is my intention to inspire my new community of Faith to listen to Indigenous voices and engage with the 94 Calls to Action. Agassiz United enjoys book studies, so journeying through a book such as *Our Home and Treaty Land* could be fruitful. I also wish to learn everything I can about the local Indigenous nations and eventually reach out to them. I think a good place to start would be to participate in the events that are being held locally. Reconciliation is a journey, not a destination, and it is everyone's responsibility to listen, learn, and act. Following the call of Christ, I have faith and a duty to participate in Canada's history that connects the past and present and continues into the future.

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Wrestling with Paul: The question of manumission in the epistle to Philemon

Sherry Brown

For ST 3128: Theological Hermeneutics (April 2026)

Introduction

Is Paul against slavery? And more importantly, is he actively working to end it? His letter to Philemon is a short, nuanced piece of writing that appears on its surface to be Paul's most specific work, in that it ostensibly deals with the immediate issue of one slaveowner's relationship with one of his slaves. In our effort to make sense of Paul or any selection from scripture, David C. Steinmetz says the interpreter "must demythologize the text in order to grasp the sacred mystery cloaked in the language of actual events."¹ In other words, we must begin and end with ambiguity, reminding ourselves of the historicity of the epistle in order to better understand its abstract elements, to glean the "spiritual sense of Scripture" which is "always based on the literal sense and derived from it."² Therefore, I seek in this paper to cut through the immense debate and dialogue that has arisen out of assumptions about this epistle, getting back down to the bare facts of the issue at hand, and then follow this simplified reading to the theological and political issues Paul is addressing in his letter to Philemon, a text that holds too much back to allow for a surface-level interpretation.

A Hermeneutic of Trust

I aim, as Esau McCaulley says, to "adopt the posture of Jacob and refuse to let go of the text until it blesses us," adopting "a hermeneutic of trust in which we are patient with

¹ Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," 75.

² Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," 77.

the text.”³ There is no question that Paul’s statements on slavery have been weaponized for centuries and been the cause of truly immeasurable damage; Howard Thurman famously stated that after years of listening to slaveowners read from Paul’s epistles, “I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.”⁴ In 1 Timothy 6, Paul (or someone claiming to be Paul) writes that enslaved people should “consider their masters worthy of respect,” and in Ephesians 6:5 he tells enslaved people to “obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.” With these verses in mind, it is highly debated whether or not Paul wishes Philemon to manumit Onesimus, with the assumption being that a call for legal manumission would indicate an anti-slavery stance on Paul’s part. This linkage implies that Paul’s letter to Philemon is the deciding factor when it comes to whether or not Paul condones slavery, and it then follows that interpretations of all of his other statements on the subject are dependent upon our interpretation of this single letter. Factors that may complicate this logic include the debate over whether or not the letter is written by Paul or is pseudepigraphic,⁵ but the centuries-long scrutiny of this epistle, and the enduring debate over whether Onesimus’s manumission is the issue at hand, is built on its centrality within discussions regarding Paul’s views on slavery.

I point this out to demonstrate the motion of the “wrestling” that McCaulley describes, and the patience the biblical texts require of us; interpretation involves emphasizing and de-emphasizing, measuring texts against one another and negotiating their meaning in relation to one another. McCaulley contends that “the enslaved person’s biblical interpretation, which gave birth to early Black biblical interpretation, was *canonical* from its inception.”⁶ Because modern readers’ experiences are represented within the Scriptures, their interpretation is not only relevant, but has always been so. The “wrestling” in which interpreters engage is not a means of eisegesis, of unfounded meaning-making, but of claiming one’s rightful place as an active participant within historical and enduring

³ McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 21.

⁴ McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 18.

⁵ Neil, *Liberating Paul*, 44.

⁶ McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 19.

dynamics of which the Bible is an early witness. The key to polysemy is embracing not only the multiple levels of meaning within a text for one group, but the infinite number of groups or persons for whom the text will contain multiple layers of meaning.

The Manumission Debate

I think this gives us more than enough license to explore the Philemon manumission debate with the intent to rise above it, both because it is impossible to settle, and because asking a question to which the answer is either “yes” or “no” ignores the epistle’s potential for truly meaningful insight. By this, I don’t mean the question should be sidestepped, as it often is. Bernardo Cho presents a common argument by noting that “to expect that Paul would request Philemon to pioneer an abolition of slavery of sorts seems quite anachronistic.”⁷ While this line of thinking helpfully highlights our tendency to apply modern political contexts retroactively, it ultimately assumes that it is nearly impossible that Paul could be asking for Onesimus’s manumission. Many scholars agree that “the end of slavery was beyond Paul’s own horizon,”⁸ an argument that assumes Paul in no way objects to slavery nor is seeking the manumission of an enslaved friend, but excuses him for this by claiming that slavery was historically too enormous for its dissolution to be fathomable. This is simply not compelling logic; Cho himself points out that Paul would have known very intimately of the cruelty widely enacted upon enslaved people by slaveowners,⁹ making it very difficult to excuse anyone preaching the gospel for turning a blind eye to it. Craig De Vos goes further, pointing out that “the legal act of manumission, in and of itself, would not have fundamentally altered the actual relationship between the freed slave and his/her former master”¹⁰ because “the terms of manumissions were solely under the control of the slave-owners.”¹¹ Onesimus would likely have become a “client” to Philemon’s “patron”, “a particular form of social relationship that involves an exchange of

⁷ Cho, “Subverting Slavery,” 12.

⁸ Cho, “Subverting Slavery,” 1.

⁹ Cho, “Subverting Slavery,” 6.

¹⁰ De Vos, “Once a Slave, Always a Slave?” 101.

¹¹ Cho, “Subverting Slavery,” 5.

different types of 'goods' based on a marked inequality of power."¹² While the slaveowners Howard Thurman encountered may have gladly assumed Paul was pro-slavery (I say "may" only because McCaulley notes that Galatians 3:28 and other explicitly liberating writings from Paul "were not popular among slave masters"¹³), even scholars who are anti-slavery and clearly hope the Bible supports their views are quick to betray their clear assumptions that Paul was pro-slavery by being eager to argue that he should be excused for his stance on the grounds that he didn't know better, or that he would not have made a difference anyway. If we are wrestling the text to find a blessing, this is not it.

But there are those who believe Paul was asking for the manumission of Onesimus, weighing the letter against his other writings. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza makes the case that "given the background of oriental cultic and Jewish religious manumission," Galatians 3:28 would have led enslaved people to believe they could "expect freedom from their initiation into the Christian community."¹⁴ Sticking close to the letter at hand, Elliott Neil claims that while "we might doubt that Paul has a single, comprehensive rule on the legal status of slaves as such," it is at the very least clear that in this particular case, Paul "sought to persuade the Christian community that the norms of life 'in Christ' required the renunciation of the slaveholder's legal prerogative over the slave."¹⁵ Neil vehemently objects to "the common tendency to conform this letter to the interests of a slave society,"¹⁶ or, in other words, the assumption that Paul is pro-slavery, either on the part of those who wish to claim that the Bible itself is pro-slavery, or on the part of those who wish to argue that the Bible is anti-slavery *in spite of* Paul. In line with Schüssler Fiorenza, Neil makes an extensive argument in favour of Paul's desire for Onesimus's manumission based in part on his belief that a precedent has already been established within the Jesus movement, and asks why interpreters do not often consider the possibility that Onesimus came to Paul not by accident, but expecting that Paul would "respond in just the way he

¹² De Vos, "Once a Slave, Always a Slave?" 97.

¹³ McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 18.

¹⁴ Neil, *Liberating Paul*, 50.

¹⁵ Neil, *Liberating Paul*, 48.

¹⁶ Neil, *Liberating Paul*, 44.

did, that is, to intervene by urging the slave's manumission."¹⁷ While Cho does not share Neil's belief that Paul's concern was manumission, he does argue that Paul's "gospel of reconciliation reframed the way Philemon was to treat his runaway slave around Christ's lordship, and hence subverted the core of slavery from within,"¹⁸ but that "the apostle had to work with society as he found it."¹⁹ The distinction Cho is making here is between political and ontological change, and while I would argue these cannot be separated in almost any case including in Philemon, I believe he brings up an important question about Paul's approach to political change. I would argue that to ask whether or not Paul is asking Philemon to legally manumit Onesimus in the first place is the wrong question. Rather than looking for proof that Paul falls on either side of a binary, perhaps a better question is: "Why doesn't Paul just tell Philemon what to do?"

Critical Fabulation

The reason for the manumission debate is simple: Paul does not explicitly ask Philemon to legally free Onesimus. However, it is important to note that Paul is not entirely explicit about what it is on a practical level he is asking Philemon to do *in general*; for instance, he never tells Philemon to refrain from beating Onesimus when he rebels, which would tell us that Paul, without a doubt, assumes that Philemon will remain Onesimus's legal owner. De Vos points out that Paul's expectation that Philemon will obey him (v. 21) "implies that Paul was trying to make a definite request,"²⁰ even though we don't know what this request is with certainty. Victor Audu reasons this is due to the brevity of the letter, which may indicate that "the recipients of the epistle would have been acquainted with the issue being addressed."²¹ I wonder, however, if it goes deeper than that.

With this in mind, I want to venture down a different path, one that takes a close look at what is *not* said in Paul's letter just as much as what *is*. Saidiya Hartman gives us

¹⁷ Neil, *Liberating Paul*, 51.

¹⁸ Cho, "Subverting Slavery," 1.

¹⁹ Cho, "Subverting Slavery," 15.

²⁰ De Vos, "Once a Slave, Always a Slave?" 91.

²¹ Audu, "Building a Reconciled Community," 480.

the term “critical fabulation” to describe the process by which we may “tell an impossible story” and “amplify the impossibility of its telling.”²² In other words, it is by paying careful attention to what is not said, and therefore perhaps what cannot be said, that we discover truths so powerful that they are simply assumed, or even dangerous. To apply this, I first want to ask who the invisible characters are in this narrative. The letter is written by Paul and addressed to Philemon, but the letter’s subject is Onesimus (and, by association, the people alongside whom he is enslaved) about whom we know very little; it is painfully typical to find a person from a marginalized community in the margins of their own story. The assumption is often that Onesimus is a runaway slave,²³ but this is never said within the epistle. All that is discussed is whether or not he will be received well by Philemon when he returns, and we know that the stakes are rather high because Paul’s appeal is intense, “with two conditional clauses detailing the depth of Paul’s anxiety about Onesimus’ welfare and his willingness to cover any debts Philemon might have incurred through Onesimus’ actions in order to ensure reconciliation is achieved.”²⁴ These conditional clauses plead ignorance either truthfully or untruthfully, with Paul only saying Philemon should charge him εἰ (if) Onesimus has wronged him or owes him anything. Paul does not say whether or not Onesimus is imprisoned with him or how they came to meet, nor why he is not currently on Philemon’s property, which has caused several competing theories to arise. John Barclay suggests that Paul was “deliberately ambiguous” because “there were immense difficulties”²⁵ associated with any request he may have been making. To manumit Onesimus would have set “a dangerous precedent”²⁶ if Onesimus was a runaway because this would have been rewarding an act that would have normally resulted in punishment with “the full wrath of the law,”²⁷ but we can easily conclude that even if manumission is not the issue, anything less than punishment would have had the

²² Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.

²³ Audu, “Building a Reconciled Community,” 480.

²⁴ Audu, “Building a Reconciled Community,” 482.

²⁵ De Vos, “Once a Slave, Always a Slave?,” 90.

²⁶ De Vos, “Once a Slave, Always a Slave?,” 90.

²⁷ Audu, “Building a Reconciled Community,” 480.

same effect. Philemon's reputation as a Roman slave owner would have suffered,²⁸ and we can only conclude that his authority would have been questioned by the other enslaved people in his household, especially because Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon's house. Even if Onesimus has done nothing to incur punishment, an enormous shift in his relationship with his owner is an enormous shift for everyone. Onesimus's reunion with his people – his allies living together under slavery, some of whom may be his friends and/or biological family – is not only inevitable, but is also guaranteed by Paul. In fact, no separation from them can be forced when what he is asking is that Onesimus be treated well and as a brother. Paul is not only asking for whatever he is asking on behalf of Onesimus; he is asking for a global loss of authority and power on Philemon's part.

Paul's Political Theology

This is the crux of Paul's request: the impossible dichotomy. As we have seen, scholars are divided about whether or not Paul is requesting manumission, but are agreed on Paul's very clear request for Onesimus to be treated like family from hereon. The debate among those who are wrestling for that blessing, therefore, is truly about whether Paul wants Philemon to manumit Onesimus and is therefore against slavery, or is complacent when it comes to slavery because he believes that the much greater issue concerns brotherly love between all members of the Jesus movement. But how can Paul be complacent about slavery as a system when he is asking Philemon to lose status and power, and to act against that system? Norman Peterson argues that "the tension between the social role 'brother' and the social roles 'master' and 'slave' are in fact incompatible,"²⁹ which we know to be true not only in a spiritual sense but in a very practical, political one. De Vos makes the claim that while Paul "does not seek to alter the fact that legally and structurally they remained master and slave, he wants to bring about a fundamental change in the nature of their relationship as master and slave,"³⁰ but we simply cannot

²⁸ Cho, "Subverting Slavery," 12.

²⁹ Neil, *Liberating Paul*, 47.

³⁰ De Vos, "Once a Slave, Always a Slave?" 102.

separate the legal/structural from the fundamental when the two dramatically affect one another. If Onesimus's fellow slaves are not already followers of Jesus, his transformed relationship with Philemon will be a compelling enough reason to join the movement, and a precedent will have been set that will mandate Philemon's transformation of his entire way of life. New slaves will not be possible, and his income will be greatly affected. For Philemon to take Onesimus into his home "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother," (v.16) he would need to do the same for all of those he enslaves, putting an end to his status as a slave owner, relinquishing his ownership and power over other human beings. Likewise, Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of love, not only because "it is difficult to turn down an appeal made on account of love,"³¹ but also because Paul is not just making a one-time request. He is divulging his entire theology, one that would see structures crumble in the face of the equalizing love "that does not consider Onesimus as being different from all other people."³² De Vos's excuse for Paul not seeking manumission, being that it would not change the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus,³³ accidentally hits upon the truth of the matter: manumission is an anticipated byproduct of the transformed relationship Paul is seeking. It does not matter whether he is asking for manumission or not, because the manumission is a natural outcome of his much larger request.

Conclusion

Philemon is an ideal text to wrestle, as its ambiguity and incredibly high stakes imbue it with great potential to either devastate or elevate, as we have seen throughout the history of its interpretation. To say Paul is not interested in the law or politics, but his theology, is to understand his theology as being merely theoretical and not deeply practical. Paul is very interested in the cause-and-effect relationship between spiritual and structural transformation, as we can see when we put Hartman's critical fabulation into

³¹ Audu, "Building a Reconciled Community," 478.

³² Audu, "Building a Reconciled Community," 484.

³³ De Vos, "Once a Slave, Always a Slave?" 97.

action, bringing the background into the foreground in order to discover what we can only hope happens after the letter ends. McCaulley's hermeneutic of trust helps us see clearly that to assume the worst of Paul may not be the most logical, unbiased choice, because doing so gets in the way of seeing that Paul recognizes the political ramifications of loving one's neighbour, so much so that he writes knowing that much can be left unsaid. Love speaks for itself.

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In Their Own Words: War, Conscience, and *The United Church Observer*, 1939

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Introduction

On September 10th, 1939, Canada officially joined the war against Nazi Germany, a mere twenty-one years after the end of its last foray into the European battlefield. In the intervening years, Canadians had mourned their lost loved ones, suffered through the challenges of a Depression, and recognized the union of several Christian denominations into the United Church of Canada.

The First World War loomed large in the memories of most Canadians in the fall of 1939, and there was little of the enthusiasm for war that was prevalent in 1914.¹ According to Historian Gordon L. Heath, “While the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches were all publicly united in their endorsement of the decision to go to war, the United Church of Canada (hereafter UCC) was a significant exception to this trend.”² The membership of the United Church was sharply divided by those who supported the war and a vocal pacifist minority.³ This would become one of the first major tests of the United Church of Canada: where would unity be found given such a gulf between perspectives on war?

One way in which United Church members conversed across the nation was through their official publication *The United Church Observer*. *The Observer* was in its infancy when war broke out, having published its first issue only on March 1, 1939, following the merger of *The New Outlook*, *The United Church Record* and *Missionary*

¹ John W. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (Welch Publishing Company, 1988), 149.

² Gordon L. Heath, “Irreconcilable Differences: Wartime Attitudes of George C. Pidgeon and R. Edis Fairbairn, 1939-1945” *Historical Papers 1999: Canadian Society of Church History*, 1999, 29.

³ I am using the words ‘membership’ and ‘members’ generically in this paper to include adherents and any others who even loosely would consider the United Church their spiritual home, even if they were not officially members.

Review, and *The Christian Advance*. Just as the Church found its footing with the war, so too did *The Observer* under new editor A. J. Wilson.

By carefully listening to the voices of contributors to *The Observer* between September 1st and November 15th, 1939, this essay will investigate attitudes to war, pacifism and conscientious objection in the UCC at the outbreak of war. By bringing these voices into conversation with official declarations from the governing bodies of the UCC in conjunction with secondary sources, this investigation will show that *The Observer* itself held a key position in holding the national community together during this time of crisis.

The results will suggest further that, rather than weakening the church, the disparity of opinions held in tension became a defining characteristic of what it meant to be the United Church of Canada.

Perceptions of War in the 1930s

War in Europe slunk relentlessly closer throughout the 1930s. With an international outlook shaped in part by its missionary work, The United Church of Canada (UCC) was both acutely aware and deeply concerned about impending global conflict. The decade began with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, followed by the spread of fascism, and Hitler's rise to power in 1933.

According to Eleanor J. Stebner, "The Church spoke regularly during the decade against war."⁴ In the October 2nd, 1935 issue of *The New Outlook*, Moderator Richard Roberts wrote, "We are living these days under dark and ominous clouds: and it does not as yet appear what the event will be.... Under the threat of war... let us trust God quietly and let us seek Him patiently in prayer."⁵

Roberts was a prominent advocate of pacifism and co-founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international group focused on non-violence. His election as Moderator in 1934 represents a broader shift within the United Church during the interwar period. By

⁴ Eleanor J. Stebner, "The 1930s," in *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2012), 52.

⁵ Richard Roberts, "The Moderator to the Church," *The New Outlook* 11, 40 (1935): 2.

the 1930s pacifism had become more widely accepted, even at the highest levels of leadership. This was in sharp contrast to attitudes in the Great War of 1914-1918, when not only Roberts, but well-known Canadian Methodist minister J. S. Woodworth as well as others either chose or were forced to leave their positions because of their pacifism.

This distinctive shift away from the patriotic enthusiasm demonstrated at the start of World War I was a consequence largely of the huge losses suffered during that war. According to theologian Ian McKay Manson, “the advent of European conflict once again raised the haunting spectre that a new generation’s best and brightest would be slaughtered.”⁶ Yet as war became ever more imminent, it also became more difficult for many to hold onto their pacifist ideals.

In reality, there were three possible attitudes towards war, broadly speaking. The first option was to collaborate and participate in war as an act of duty towards one’s country whenever called upon to do so by a legitimate government. The second was to exercise one’s conscience and participate in war only when the war met personal criteria for being just. And the third was the pacifist position, which meant refusing to participate in any war regardless of circumstances or purposes. In a statement entitled “Christian Principles”, the 1938 General Council recognized “the conscientious right and action of each of these groups.”⁷

While the 1938 General Council discerned the need to defend conscientious objection, “Christian Principles” does reveal a movement away from the more pacifist ideal that they had seemed to proclaim earlier in the 1930s. In fact, at the start of “Christian Principles,” the 1936 General Council itself reviewed the position of the UCC throughout the 1930s with these words:

The United Church of Canada, in General Council assembled, declares its *unchanging conviction* that war is contrary to the mind of Christ” (1932). “We believe armed warfare to be contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ” (1934). “As

⁶ Ian McKay Manson, “The United Church and the Second World War,” *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Donald Schweitzer (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 58.

⁷ The United Church of Canada General Council, “Christian Principles,” *Record of Proceedings* (United Church of Canada Publishers, 1938), 94.

Christians we positively reject war, because war rejects love, defies the will of Christ and denies the worth of man.⁸ (*Italics added*)

With the 1938 deliberate recognition of a plurality of conscientious positions – including the choice to enlist – it does not seem certain then that this has been an “unchanging conviction.”⁹ The emphasis on conscience above all else, could be understood if not as an evolution of thought, at least as a clarification. The Church had found a middle ground between the patriotic fervor of 1914 and the pacifism of the early 1930s. Its most strident appeal was for respect for individual conscience, calling on members “to honour each other’s conscientious decisions, and to maintain at all times and under all circumstances goodwill and full fellowship within the Church and with all men (sic).”¹⁰

According to historian Thomas Socknat, the United Church’s Board of Evangelical Social Service under John Mutchmor questioned the ‘practical value’ of pacifism in late summer 1939. But John W. Woodside, elected Moderator of the UCC in 1938, bolstered the importance of respecting the authority of conscience in a letter sent to clergy on September 8th, 1939, just as Canada prepared to join the conflict.¹¹ The debate had begun.

As a relatively new denomination, the United Church, since even before union, had been learning to hold differing convictions within a shared identity. The outbreak of war would test that capacity profoundly.

Above all, in “Christian Principles”, the Church called for repentance and for all to acknowledge “with deep humility our share in this guilt.”¹² This guilt arose because, “we have not spoken as we ought against attitudes, policies and injustices that make for war; nor have we sought as fully as we should to bring about understanding, goodwill, and justice between groups and peoples.”¹³

⁸ Ibid, 93.

⁹ Being aligned with tradition is an important value for churches in general. It would be interesting to find out how many statements have begun over the centuries with an appeal to the past.

¹⁰ UCC General Council, “Christian Principles,” 93.

¹¹ Thomas Socknat, *Witness Against War* (University of Toronto Press, 1987), 199.

¹² Ibid, 94.

¹³ Ibid.

Further Contextual Issues

Three issues surfaced repeatedly in *The Observer* as war approached: missions, refugees and pacifism. While this essay will focus on the last of these, these concerns formed an essential backdrop to reflections on war.

The plight of refugees had been a growing worry for UCC members who felt it was important to care for them both as a Christian and Canadian duty. An editorial for instance from the inaugural March 1st, 1939 issue of *The Observer* highlighted Christian duty toward the growing number of European refugees, stating, “The British are providing for them with a generosity which should put Canada to shame.”¹⁴

Similarly, the impact of Japanese aggression on UCC missions, particularly in China during this period, was a frequent subject in *The Observer*, as was concern for Japanese Christians. Despite the hostilities, United Church of Canada missionaries continued to be appointed to various places in the world throughout the fall of 1939.¹⁵

These concerns reflect a broader moral framework shaped perhaps by the lingering influence of the Social Gospel. Though diminished, it continued to inform a conviction that Christianity demanded active engagement in the pursuit of justice. The question was not only whether to go to war, but what justice required.

These were of course not the only concerns of United Church members. In addition to pieces on missions, refugees and pacifism, *The Observer* continued to run articles on a variety of issues of interest to United Church members, ranging from devotionals, to theological colleges, to the shortage of ministers and much else besides. But fears and empathy for refugees and missions, and by extension the victims of war, provided a backdrop within which United Church members wrestled with their Christian and Canadian understandings of how to participate in the coming war if at all.

¹⁴ “The Church and Refugees” *The United Church Observer* 1, no.1 March 1st 1939, 4.

¹⁵ *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1, no.17, November 1st, 1939. Other issues throughout 1939 also contained articles on these subjects.

Canada Joins the War

On Sept 1st, 1939, on the eve of war, the editors of *The Observer* not surprisingly seemed to anticipate the discord that was soon to arise. In an editorial entitled “The Church and War” they wrote:

The Church through the last few years has made wise and profound statements as to the sin of war. To these we have probably all subscribed whole-heartedly. Yet in the face of an imminent threat of hostilities a decision of a practical and personal kind has to be made by each Church member, each minister. Some of these may run counter to the pronouncements of the Church. That is a responsibility which each must take for himself.¹⁶

The ensuing weeks would see numerous opinion pieces, letters and articles on the subject of war participation, as well as a regular spread of sermons which again not surprisingly, covered the topic of war. In their October 1st edition, the sermons were all from September 10th, the very day Canada had officially joined the war.¹⁷ Each of these early war sermons decried the reality of war, but each took a slightly different approach, highlighting the many worries and questions United Church members held at this time across the breadth of Canada. A short summary helps set the stage for further reflection on war participation.

Arnold Matthews (Memorial United Church, St. Catharines, ON) avoided all talk of pacifism or conscience, and instead focused on common humanity, urging readers not to ‘nationalize’ their Christianity (as had happened at times in 1914).¹⁸ Willard E. Brewing (St George’s United Church, Toronto) took a somewhat similar approach although his focus was less on common humanity than on common Christianity, and what it means to be a Christian. Although he does not offer a clear position on war participation, he does name the problem, stating in reference to the Great War, “There was perhaps no institution

¹⁶ “The Church and War” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,13, September 1st, 1939, 4.

¹⁷ In a biweekly publication of that era, there would not have been enough lead time for the editorial team and printers to include these or other responses to the declaration of war in the September 15th edition.

¹⁸ Arnold Matthews, “One Bundle of Life” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,15, October 1st, 1939, 17.

suffered more in loss of prestige from the war than the Church, for its participation was against its highest principles and deepest conviction. And now she faces another and must decide her relationships to it.”¹⁹

J. Norrie Anderson (Fort Massey Church, Halifax) focused on the question of evil in a sermon entitled “Why does God permit evil?”, concluding powerfully that if God did not do so, God would be a dictator like Hitler. He does not outrightly embrace pacifism, but he leans in that direction when he says, “Our cause is just, men say; therefore we must succeed. The Bible says rather our cause is just, therefore we can smile at death and captivity, because nothing can separate us from His love”.²⁰ Anderson also decries the threat of an unchecked patriotism.

Finally, Bryce Wallace (Belmont Avenue Church, Victoria) addressed the issue of war participation more directly than the others, noting “Many of us have avowed ourselves pacifists, and stated that war is man’s most hideous sin and crime; ... What shall we say now that war has been forced upon us?”²¹ He defends both the cause of the one who chooses to enlist, as well as the cause of the one who through principle does not, stating respectively, if we “take up arms it will be with an abiding certainty that we are working for Him [God]”²² and later, “We cannot do less than strive to protect all minority groups, whether isolationist or pacifist, who, according to their light, must protest against war.”²³ Wallace also is the only one to introduce a broader political perspective, arguing that this war is about defending democracy.²⁴

These sermons capture both the question of participation that many were grappling with as well as a dread of war which together were challenging faith at its deepest levels. They direct the listener back to God, open the big questions, and invite prayer without insisting necessarily on a single position. This invites the conversation within the

¹⁹ Willard E. Brewing, “What is a Christian” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,15, October 1st, 1939, 16.

²⁰ J. Norrie Anderson, “God and the Dictators” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,15, October 1st, 1939, 17.

²¹ Bryce Wallace, “What is the Message of the Church?” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,15, October 1st, 1939, 16.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid.

community and within *The Observer* to be wide-ranging and open – or rather to continue to be, since the conversation was already well under way.

The custom of expressing opinions themselves in newsprint was of course a long-standing historical reality in western society by the time *The Observer* was birthed on March 1st, 1939. Within the UCC, the openness to a variety of perspectives had already been established by *The Observer*'s predecessor papers. Participation was of course limited by literacy and English language skills in this case, but within those limitations, the editors appeared to seek as broad a readership as possible. Conversation at its deepest level is about relationship. By facilitating conversation across the breadth of the country, *The Observer* was already helping not only to shape but also to hold the identity of the fourteen-year-old church, even across difference.

Already the pages of *The Observer* were full of letters expressing a range of opinions. Of the five fairly lengthy letters on the topic published on October 1st, three expressed a pacifist perspective, one approved the war but did not comment on individual participation, and only one was stridently anti-pacifist, bluntly stating at the outset, "I along with others, object to the editorial page of our Church paper being used to propagate Pacifism".²⁵ Interestingly, this was the only letter that did not make some theological statement or reference to God. The writer's position was focused squarely on loyalty to the Crown on the one hand, and the fact that in their view this was a just war.

Two of the pacifist letters were from students stating that they and others were committed to their pacifist stance. One, who identified themselves only as a theological student, wrote, "The United Church of Canada cannot compromise on this question, for the simple reason that she will be torn between the demands of two masters. Two masters who are entirely antithetical in spirit; namely, Christ and war."²⁶

The most moving letter however was perhaps from a Mrs. E. Meikle who described losing children and other family members in the last war. She commented on the sorrow she observed in other families, and the death of her husband who could not find work after

²⁵ A. J. Belton, "Objects to Pacifist Views" *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,15, October 1st, 1939, 19.

²⁶ Theological Student, "The Church Cannot Compromise" *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,15, October 1st, 1939, 21.

the war, of whom she said, “His heart and spirit were broken”.²⁷ She went on to decry profiteering, called for the conscription of wealth, and concluded, “As a mother my cry to God is to enlighten our minds to what is truth and righteousness and justice in this year 1939. Men must come first and the homes of our nation – money last.”²⁸

In these early letters, the arguments made for the pacifist position arose primarily from faith understandings, and experience. One of the letters from a student assured the reader that they would be willing to “relieve suffering” in other ways than fighting.²⁹ This expression of loyalty to Canada and Canadians, if not to the cause of war, would be repeated in future letters from other writers. No doubt this public declaration was intended not only to express sincere solidarity, but also to stave off the accusations of sedition or traitorous behaviour which were levied at pacifists during WWI.

The Church Organizes

The October 15th, 1939, edition of *The Observer* revealed a Church beginning to organize itself to respond to war. On the first page for instance, the new War Service Committee called on individual churches to register to assist with the war effort from home as needed. This would include such things as responding to needs identified by the Red Cross and getting involved in knitting projects for soldiers overseas.³⁰

Reflections on the Church’s responsibilities continued further in. In an article by someone called “Maritimer” many of the themes already mentioned resurfaced: a sense of repentance, a desire not to fall into hate, and more practically a call for the church not to become involved in recruitment as it had in the Great War.³¹ Presbyteries began to report passing resolutions supporting the war effort, although they differed on whether they supported conscientious objection. Oshawa for instance passed a resolution *against*

²⁷ E. Meikle, “A Mother Writes” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,15, October 1st, 1939, 21.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ W. E. Mann, “Can a Christian Fight?” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,15, October 1st, 1939, 21.

³⁰ “War Service Committee Urges Registration” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,16, October 15th, 1939, 1.

³¹ “The Church Must Proclaim a Gospel of Love” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,16, October 15th, 1939, 3.

conscientious objection claiming that the burden of enlistment should fall to all who were able, while Camrose went in the opposite direction pledging their loyalty to the Crown, but only supporting enlistment “consistent with Christian conscience.”³² All Presbyteries would eventually endorse the Church’s expression of loyalty to the government in this time of war.³³

This issue of *The Observer* included two personal letters to the editor on the subject of war. J. Lavell Smith suggested in essence that The War Service Committee should be concerned with more than knitting and instead look for meaningful ways in which the refugee crisis or other needs at home could be met. He says, “Ours is a Church which has officially recognized the validity of more than one position with regard to war. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that our Church will invite men to participate in more than one form of service.”³⁴ His letter would fall on deaf ears.³⁵

The second letter, from R. M. Dickey, argued that those who go to war are as conscientious as any pacifist, and that it is not a mere question of unthinking duty. “It is a strange pacifism that can close its eyes to the atrocities perpetrated in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, and forget the undisputed fact that Hitler has over and over again broken his most solemn promises.”³⁶ Unlike earlier letters, neither this letter nor the previous one made reference to God or any particular theological perspective. There is a sense that perhaps the focus was turning towards the nature of the Church instead of the nature of God’s call.

A Witness Against War

The October 15th issue would severely stretch the Church’s ability to accept differing views, with the publication of “A Witness Against War”, a pacifist manifesto signed by sixty-

³² *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,16, October 15th, 1939, 19.

³³ Socknat, *Witness*, 200.

³⁴ J. Lavell Smith “Contents Area of Service is Too small” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,16, October 15th, 1939, 21.

³⁵ Socknat, *Witness*, 205.

³⁶ R. M. Dickey, “Protests Statements of Correspondents” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,16, October 15th, 1939, 21.

eight United Church of Canada members. The first signature on the manifesto belonged to its primary author Edis Fairbairn, who Thomas Socknat describes as a well-known ‘radical pacifist’, and member of both the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.³⁷ Interestingly, J. Lavell Smith whose letter is quoted above was also one of the signatories. An additional seven people would sign on almost immediately, so the manifesto is frequently referred to as being from seventy-five people. One of those would be former moderator Richard Roberts.

The crisis the manifesto provoked would not be because of the themes expressed in it, which would be familiar to committed readers of *The Observer*. They may be summarized as:

1) *Theology*: The theology around pacifism expressed in the manifesto was essentially the same as that found in earlier letters, briefly stated as, “The will and Kingdom of God must take precedence over the national convenience or policy. The nature of modern war is such that it is and must be incompatible with the Christian spirit and aims.”³⁸

2) *Church Reputation*: Appeal was made to the loss of “spiritual authority” suffered by the church due to its complicity in the Great War, something alluded to in the sermon by Willard E. Brewster mentioned above.

3) *Futility of War*: The signatories argued that war itself is futile in achieving “any worthy solution of international disputes, and can only bring general destruction.”³⁹

4) *Loyalty*: The manifesto finally concluded by assuring readers of their loyalty, and “readiness to implement our citizen loyalty in some form of service equally as taxing, difficult and dangerous as military service, providing it does not contribute directly to the war effort.”⁴⁰

Three things did however set this piece apart from other writing on the topic:

³⁷ Socknat, 201.

³⁸ R. Edis Fairbairn, et al, “A Witness Against War” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,16, October 15th, 1939, 21.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

- 1) It began by inviting others to add their signatures to the statement, thus moving a private decision about the orientation of one's conscience into the sphere of policy debate;
- 2) It used the General Council's words from earlier in the 1930s (as quoted above), suggesting not so subtly that their current position was inconsistent with their own previous teaching (and a consistent position would be to support total pacifism). By doing so the signatories could be perceived as undermining the position of the Church not to mention the government of Canada;⁴¹
- 3) It included dozens of signatories. The sheer volume of signatories added a weight to the piece that understandably suggested that a movement was afoot that could, again, undermine the General Council and would be perceived by many readers as also being an effort to undermine Canada's war effort.

These three things combined catapulted an internal denominational conversation into the public sphere with all the subtlety of a cannon ball. Many of the major Canadian newspapers ran editorials condemning the manifesto.⁴² "Newspapers across Canada denounced the signatories as dangerous traitors who had abused their pastoral authority by encouraging their people to follow this highly perilous course."⁴³ In response to a huge public outcry, the Attorney General of Ontario promised an investigation (which was eventually quietly closed), and doubts were cast on the loyalty of the United Church of Canada as a whole.

The response by the Sub-Executive was as swift as it was harsh. In a statement published in the November 1st issue of *The Observer*, it began by assuring the public that "A

⁴¹ Thomas Socknat disagrees with this argument, stating "It [Witness] made no attempt to undermine the authority of the 1938 council" (Socknat, 201). But by quoting the General Council's statement and then coming to an opposite conclusion, the signatories of "Witness" would have been naive not to think that at least some people would see them as undermining the General Council. More likely in my view, they saw this as one of the costs of speaking publicly on this issue.

⁴² Gordon L. Heath, "Irreconcilable Differences: Wartime Attitudes of George C. Pidgeon and R. Edis Fairbairn, 1939-1945" *Historical Papers 1999: Canadian Society of Church History* (1999), 31.

⁴³ Manson, "Second World War," 61.

Witness Against War” was issued by private individuals and not by any “official body in the Church.”⁴⁴ It noted further that not a single presbytery had expressed itself similarly. And it defended the loyalty of the United Church of Canada by pointing to its over 500 War Service Units and the more than 150 applications for the Chaplaincy service that it had so far received, all within a month of the declaration of war.⁴⁵

To this point, the statement provided reasonable answers to the questions that had arisen in the aftermath of the publication of the manifesto. However, the next portion of their statement could be understood as undermining the UCC’s support for conscientious objection in general. They stated, “Even the appearance of organizing opinion against the *tragic necessities* of the community cannot but jeopardize the essential unity and fellowship both of the Church and of the nation.”⁴⁶ (Italics mine). By calling the ways people were contributing to the war effort “necessities” the Sub-Committee gave the impression that participation in war was in fact a necessity.

This impression was further sealed in their conclusion which clarified, “The Sub-Executive would take this opportunity of proclaiming afresh the entire and unfailing loyalty of The United Church of Canada to His Majesty, the King, and its steady purpose to support him in the present dire struggle in every way which is open and proper to the Church.”⁴⁷ The British realm thus received renewed fealty, while the Kingdom of God received no mention at all.

The November 1st and November 15th issues of *The Observer* were replete with letters commenting on the furor from one perspective or another. R. B. Y. Scott called the statement by the Sub-Committee:

[A] desertion of our comrades who are under fire because they have made an unpopular witness for conscience sake. The whole tenor of the official statement suggests that the Church’s reputation for loyalty to the military enterprise of the State is a more important consideration than that of loyalty to religious conviction....

⁴⁴ “Sub-Executive Issues Statement” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1, 17, November 1st, 1939, 4.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The United Church has no reason to be ashamed of men who take an exceedingly unpopular position in response to their deepest religious convictions.⁴⁸

Other writers confronted the original signatories with vehemence. Several chastised them for creating disunity. A. E. Baker wrote, “churches have lost spiritual authority, not by a surrender to the war spirit, but by an absence of it. A little less pacifism and compromise and a full-fashioned front against the devil’s work at home and abroad might be more effective.”⁴⁹

Others praised the manifesto, such as Lillian E. Westill who wrote, “Our loyalty to God and Christ’s teaching comes first.”⁵⁰ While there were no new theological statements made, several letters focused on what loyalty to the Crown or God should look like.

The Editors of *The Observer* finally weighed in on November 15th, noting that they had received more letters than they could run on November 1st and so had published more, but that they would be closing the debate after this point. In many ways the editorial board under A. J. Wilson served as ultimate peacemaker in this controversy. They reminded readers that “Minority opinion must be respected as well as majority opinion.”⁵¹ Going further, they reminded the Church that:

The pronouncement of the General Council of the United Church on war and peace has recognized that there are two positions which may conscientiously be taken by Christian people. ... But differences of opinion, conscientiously taken should not interfere with our intimate relationship as members of the Church nor should there be any lack of courtesy towards those who differ from us.⁵²

In this way, the editorial board of *The Observer* acted as mediator of a conflict, in a manner one might have expected instead from the leadership of the Church.

⁴⁸ R. B. Y. Scott, “Critical of Official Action” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,18, November 15th, 1939, 17.

⁴⁹ A. E. Baker, “Fear God and Honour the King” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,18, November 15th, 1939, 17.

⁵⁰ Lillian E. Westill, “Our First Loyalty is to God” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,18, November 15th, 1939, 16.

⁵¹ “A Plea for Tolerance” *The United Church Observer*, Vol. 1,18, November 15th, 1939, 4.

⁵² Ibid.

Lessons for the Church

The crisis provoked by “A Witness to War” and the way it was addressed provide insight into the United Church of Canada at the time. First, it is possible that in an effort to be a ‘national’ Church, the General Council at the time (or at least the Sub-Executive) struggled to balance its allegiance to the nation with the complexities of accepting the freedom of conscience and thus speech it professed to accept. Thomas Socknat notes that the Sub-Executive itself was divided over how to respond to “A Witness Against War”.⁵³ Without clearly internalizing the position around conscience it was proclaiming, the Sub-Executive was unable to address the internal church crisis effectively. Instead, it focused on addressing the external crisis, that is the question of where its loyalties lay.

Secondly, and fortunately, the UCC’s structure allowed for other leadership bodies such as the editorship of *The Observer* to step into the fray and at least partially defuse the situation. The editors not only facilitated conversation through their publication of various perspectives, but they mediated the spirit of that conversation in a way that allowed it to continue and that was consonant with Christian teachings. By lifting up the value of respect towards even ‘minority opinion’ they invited difficult but important conversations to continue.

The diplomacy and compassion with which the editors navigated this crisis demonstrates the profound value of conversation itself within the UCC. This value would continue to be a fundamental tenet of the church, so deeply ingrained that it is often overlooked. Conversation, as the church grew through the years, would not only be with voices in the present but would be between the present and the past.

Echoes of the conversations examined today for instance would reverberate through the 1994 GC35 document *Beyond Military Force: Seeking Peace after the Cold War* which states first in reminiscence of the many statements against war produced in the 1930s that, “Christ’s teaching demands that evil in human society be overcome with good and

⁵³ Socknat, *Witness*, 204.

that justice and peace be built by means of love and non-violent action.”⁵⁴ But it qualifies it later, perhaps in remembrance of the 1939 crisis, “we can not offer a once-and-for-all decision about our response to war in our world; we will find ourselves in a process of moral discernment, and decision-making over and over again.”⁵⁵

In 2008 the General Council Executive (GCE) would attempt to bring even greater clarity to their perspective on war by endorsing the United Nation’s *Responsibility to Protect* framework. This was based on Just War principles that included consideration of right authority, just cause, right intention, last resort, proportional means, and reasonable prospects. The GCE noted at the end of the document that the UCC’s version of the framework should further involve a case-by-case approach that would rely on extensive consultation with affected partners and conversation before any decision be made. They emphasized that “this is already established United Church practice.”⁵⁶ Indeed it is.

Conclusion

Through an in-depth examination of the voices and opinions of UCC members expressed in the fledgling denominational paper *The Observer* throughout the fall of 1939, this essay has exposed the breadth of opinions on war participation during that period. Tensions arose between, among other things, questions of the morality of war, questions of loyalty to Crown versus loyalty to visions of a pacifist Christ, questions of past pacifist-sounding statements versus the reality of the present crisis, and finally questions around the degree to which individual conscience could be respected. A further undeclared tension was around the degree to which pacifist beliefs could even be declared during a challenging time of war.

⁵⁴ United Church of Canada General Council, *GC35 Beyond Military Force: Seeking Peace after the Cold War (1994B251)*, 1994. Accessed March 19th, 2026, <https://generalcouncil.ca/document/gc35-beyond-military-force-seeking-peace-after-cold-war-1994b251>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ The United Church of Canada General Council, *GCE Responsibility to Protect (2008-11-15-347)*, 2008. Accessed March 18th, 2026, <https://generalcouncil.ca/document/gce-responsibility-protect-2008-11-15-347>.

Rather than resolving these tensions fully, the United Church debates of 1939 demonstrate that disagreement was not merely tolerated but became part of the Church's self-understanding, worked out however imperfectly through open and often contested conversation, often in the pages of its denominational publications. The manner in which these publications witness to the concerns of their time cannot be underestimated.

The insistence that "minority opinion must be respected," even in a time of national emergency, established a pattern that would re-emerge in later controversies. Whether in debates over war, human sexuality, or global justice, the United Church would continue to wrestle with the challenge of being both a community of radical inclusion and a body committed to prophetic Christian witness within the Canadian context. The willingness to hear each other's voices and to converse across difference, far from weakening the Church, has become one of its most enduring and generative features.

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Celebrating 100 Years: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Rev Dr Rob Fennell

A Sermon (1 Corinthians 12:4-14)

It's a special pleasure to worship together, as we celebrate this year the 100th anniversary of The United Church of Canada.

The very first nudging toward a united church for Canada started around 1903, after two or three decades of other church unions among the Presbyterians and Methodists in Canada, within their respective denominational families.

But it wasn't until 1925 that the formal union of all the Methodists, about two-thirds of the Presbyterians, all the Congregationalists, and all the Local Union Churches took place. A huge celebration was held at the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto, near what we used to call Maple Leaf Gardens. Incidentally, the Mutual Street Arena is where the Maple Leafs hockey team played for their first 13 seasons.

In 1925, Mutual Street was the largest indoor arena in Canada, and we filled it right up with thousands of people, sharing passionate prayer, worship, singing, and preaching to give thanks to God for this amazing coming together of the original partners who formed the United Church. Later, in 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren denomination in Canada also joined in.

What I would like to offer this morning is not a rehearsal of the past, although our history as a United Church is very rich and moving. Instead, I'd like to highlight what I would consider four of the key features of United Church of Canada identity and theological heritage that we can celebrate, and that we can continue to champion in the years ahead. There are others, I'm sure, but these four are central to what it means to be the United Church.

An anniversary – whether it is 5 years or 50 years, 100 years or 1000 years – gives us the chance to tell the old stories. But in the Christian movement, we also lean forward to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying in the present. We try to open the sails of our hearts and catch the fresh breeze of the Spirit as she draws us forward. We have a

wonderful heritage in the United Church, and we have many more years of faithful witness and service ahead of us.

The four features of the United Church of Canada I want to speak about are:

1. Personal spiritual development (discipleship)
2. Local charitable action (serving our neighbours)
3. Social transformation (social justice)
4. The centrality of Jesus Christ (focus on God)

I'm sure these are not a surprise to you, if you have been around the United Church for a while. And if you have been part of another Christian church, they will sound pretty familiar. And if you are new to the Christian movement, you can be assured that these are things that are common among most Christian churches.

1. Personal spiritual development (discipleship)

From the very beginning, the United Church has put an emphasis on developing or growing in spiritual terms. This has taken many forms: offering Sunday School and youth programs, for example. For adults, book studies, prayer groups, Bible studies, and more are meant to help us grow spiritually, to deepen our lives as disciples or followers of Jesus.

Personal spiritual development is absolutely for the benefit of each individual. But it also helps us to grow up in the Spirit toward a richer fellowship with one another. To follow Jesus means not only a kind of private, personal ethic, but also to bond deeply with our fellow Christians in the community of the Church. To follow Jesus means to be part of a community, a fellowship, a common team that pulls together in the same direction.

As from the beginning, we in the United Church today continue to teach and learn together, discovering how to pray, how to engage with the Bible, how to share our faith with one another; and we learn how to speak of our faith beyond the four walls of the church. We have learned and continue to learn about the spiritual traditions of others,

such as Indigenous peoples and persons from other religious communities. These encounters enrich our faith walk as well.

Our personal spiritual development or discipleship also shows up in ordinary life, loving our neighbours, committing ourselves to kindness and care, and serving the common good. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthian church, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Every person has a share in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the joyful task of growing spiritually has always been part of our identity and the path we walk together.

2. Local charitable action (serving our neighbours)

Again, from the very beginning, the United Church has had a very strong emphasis on local charitable action – serving our neighbours in concrete and caring ways.

We have taken food to share when people known to us are in trouble or grieving. We have been very active in setting up and serving in food banks, food cupboards, soup kitchens, breakfast programs, and more, so that hungry bellies can get something to eat. We have shared our money with other causes and programs that do good work. We have built hospitals and schools. We have welcomed refugees and provided programs for young families and persons living with addiction. We have visited prisoners and people in hospital and long term care. These and many, many more concrete, specific actions are in fact part of our spirituality, part of following Jesus.

It was Jesus after all, who said, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me - - just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

To love and serve our neighbours is to love and serve God. “To love and serve others” is even how we describe part of our shared, collective calling and identity in *A New Creed*.

These kinds of concrete actions, concrete forms of service that help to alleviate suffering and assist our neighbours, will always be central for the United Church. These kinds of expressions of our faith will continue to be central to who we are and who we are meant to be.

3. *Social transformation (social justice)*

From the earliest days of the United Church, our denomination has been at the forefront of Canadian society, calling for transformation and justice.

In the first part of the 20th century, this was called the Social Gospel movement. We in the United Church were right in there, right at the heart of it. The Social Gospel teaches that our salvation is not only about a private relationship with Jesus that guarantees a trip to heaven when we die. Our salvation is tied up together with the well-being and salvation of our neighbours as well.

When there has been injustice in the treatment of women, we have spoken out, demonstrated, lobbied, and worked for change. When racism has poisoned the wells of our common cup as a society, we have spoken out, demonstrated, lobbied, and worked for change. When mistreatment of queer folks has resulted in harm and the diminishment of life, we have spoken out, demonstrated, lobbied, and worked for change. When apartheid ripped apart South African society, we have spoke out, demonstrated, lobbied, and worked for change.

These and many more causes and needs have risen to the top of the United Church's agenda for 100 years. We are an *activist* church, deeply engaged with our society and world. We are not *separatists*, merely watching the world and abandoning it to its troubles.

In an ongoing way, now, we continue to champion social justice and social transformation. We work and yearn for reconciliation, changed hearts, and right relations with First Nations and all peoples. We shout out against the bloodshed in Gaza and

Ukraine. We advocate passionately for social policies that lift up and liberate those who are impoverished and disenfranchised.

Are we perfect at this? No! Not by a long shot. We fail, make mistakes, pick ourselves up and keep going. We are constantly learning, constantly trying to get it right. But this ongoing work of social transformation is a vital key to our identity in the United Church.

For those outside our church who might know anything about us, this might be the most distinctive thing about us. It is a special gift God has given us, to be passionate for justice, and we will continue to strive and pray and work in these directions.

As one of the three themes for our national centennial, *“Daring Justice ... the desire to live out the gospel call to love and justice in Canada and around the world,”* continues to be the way of life for us.

4. The centrality of Jesus Christ (focus on God)

Finally, I want to name not an activity or an action, but a faith conviction.

From the very beginning, the person and work of Jesus Christ has been at the centre of the United Church. Through Jesus, we have found our focus on God. As one Biblical scholar, William Barclay, once said, *“Jesus is the window through which we see what God is like.”*

By following, learning about, and drawing close to Jesus, we draw close to God. Our faith statements, our prayers, our worship services, our private devotional lives, our celebration of the sacrament of communion are centred on Jesus.

He is more than a nice guy, more than a dead historical hero.

He is the Risen One, the bringer of grace,

the witness of forgiveness, the loving sacrifice,

the light of the world, the embodiment of love,

the Word of God, the very presence of God among us.

The focus on Jesus Christ distinguishes the Christian movement from simply one more social service organization or supper club or musical appreciation society. Because Jesus is at the centre of the church and is the Lord of life, we are set free from the false idols of this and every age. No other Lord, no other force or power, can command our allegiance.

To be Christians, in the original sense of the word, is to be “little Christs” – that is, to be persons who share the light of God wherever we go, in all we do, in all we say. No one ever said this would be easy, but Jesus has promised to be with us, even to the end of the age. He remains at our side, showing us the path that leads to life. His way, his model, his path, his light opens up a life for us that is incomparable in power and goodness.

It is the power of loving vulnerability, not the power of domination.

It is the goodness of self-giving, not the accumulation of personal benefits.

When the United Church of Canada was formed in 1925, the motto that was chosen was a saying of Jesus in the gospel of John: *“That all may be one.”* It was in fact a prayer that Jesus offered for all his followers, that we would not be divided or conflicted, but that all would be one, as we are drawn into the love of the triune God, the holy Trinity, to be fed, nurtured, and strengthened, and then sent out again to serve the world God loves.

I suggest that we can and should share that prayer today and in the years ahead: that we may all be one in Christ. We can pray that our personal spiritual development will be rich and joyful. We can pray that our service to our neighbours will be generous and filled with kindness. We can pray that our commitment to social justice will continue to burn brightly and passionately for the sake of the world God loves. And we can pray that by placing Jesus Christ at the centre of our lives, we will be truly transformed into the people God would have us be.

Thanks be to God for the first 100 years of the United Church! Alleluia! Amen.

The Work of Our Hands: Craft in the United Church of Canada

Zoe Fingas

For CH 2105 United Church History (April 2026)

Paris Paloma, singer/songwriter in the modern folk-pop genre writes almost exclusively feminist inspired works. In her 2024 album *Cacophany*, Paloma's *Knitting Song* is a stunning reflection on how craft is passed down through generations, primarily from women to women, and what it means to be a part of that tradition. She sings:

The deft, agile fingers in firelight flicker
Skin laced in wrinkles that made needles sing
There, love is concreted with quietened breathing
Simple entwining of intimate string
It's a beautiful thing
[...]
Let us sit so quietly
In firelight, I know you'd die for me
How gentle can our violence be
'Tween finger and thumb
I'm sorry I'm repetitive
Don't mind, I keep forgetting it
So long as it's my thread, not the depths of our love¹

In this partial verse and chorus Paloma draws clear connection between the passing down of traditional crafts and the passing down of love. Just like Paloma, many of us associate crafts such as knitting, crocheting, quilting and sewing with our grandmothers, both familial and the female elders in communities that raised us. As such, it is no surprise that the work of the women in the United Church of Canada (UCC) throughout our history is

¹ "Paris Paloma Knitting Song Lyrics," Genius. Accessed April 13, 2026, <https://genius.com/Paris-paloma-knitting-song-lyrics>.

deeply entwined with craft, spinning out their love for the world with the work of their hands. One of the things that makes craft, in particular textile crafts such as those mentioned above, unique from the rest of art is the lack of prestige that the art forms hold. The divide between “art” and “craft” is primarily a gendered one, with painting or sculpting historically being mediums taught to men in art school, while knitting and sewing are mediums women use in domestic labour.² Because of this continued gender divide, much of this paper will focus on the work of the United Church Women (UCW), their predecessor organizations, and other female dominated groups within the UCC. The members of the UCW see craft as an integral part of their work throughout their history. In the 50th anniversary celebration book *Ordinary Heroes: Celebrating United Church Women* many UCW members were asked about projects they felt were important or meaningful. Some of the most commonly referenced projects involved craft such as the Beads of Hope, Poverty Dolls, and a Mission and Service fundraising quilt that raised \$2500.³ There are three main ways that craft has been used to further the mission of the UCC: fundraising, activism, and community building. Although the UCW has been struggling in recent years,⁴ craft has evolved to become one of the pillars of outreach in some congregations through the modern prayer shawl movement. However, this movement could not exist in its form today without being built on the backs of generations of church women expressing their love for God, each other, and the broader community through craft.

One of the most significant crafting efforts in United Church history are the garments made to aid the war effort during World War Two. Hand-knit garments were an important part of the homefront as “a warm army was an effective army.”⁵ More critical than this, soldiers needed fresh, dry socks frequently in order to avoid trench foot which

² Alana Tyson, “Art Vs Crafts? On Resisting Gendered Hierarchies of Practice in the Art World,” In *The Art of Being Dangerous: Exploring Women and Danger Through Creative Expression*, ed. Jo Shaw and Ben Fletcher-Watson (Leuven University Press, 2021), 35.

³ Noelle Boughton ed., *Ordinary Heroes: Celebrating United Church Women* (United Church Publishing House, 2012), 97.

⁴ David Wilson, “United Church Women faces challenges as family time constraints rise,” *Broadview*, January 1, 2009, <https://broadview.org/united-church-women/>.

⁵ Shirley Scott, *Canada Knits: Craft and Comfort in a Northern Land* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1990), 33.

could lead to amputation or even death.⁶ However the knitting effort during the Second World War was even more expansive than during the First World War because the recipients were no longer limited to soldiers. The war had explicit civilian targets and as such the Red Cross, one of the most significant organizers of wartime knitting, expanded their programs to include civilians impacted by the fighting.⁷ The United Church of Canada, working with the organization of the Red Cross, contributed “846,927 pairs of socks, 296,398 sweaters, 226,533 pairs of mittens and gloves, 1,068,560 miscellaneous sewn articles, and 633,522 miscellaneous knitted articles.”⁸ The UCC and Red Cross were not knitting alone, the Navy League of Canada organized a large portion of the wartime knitting efforts. Both the Red Cross and the UCC were members of the board of the Navy League who became an organizational hub in getting yarn and patterns to organizations of knitters and finished objects to the front lines.⁹ At the start of the war in particular new knitters often yielded some less than perfect results. The Red Cross hired quality control in the form of “Mrs. Brown,” or “Mrs. Fix-It”, to fix the mistakes of the beginner garments. Knots in heels or toes poorly sewn together could spiral into larger problems when soldiers were on their feet all day so she fixed as many mistakes as she could. She claimed she could repair 200 pairs of socks in a week!¹⁰ Knitting and sewing were more than just a practical endeavor or a patriotic mission, many women found comfort through the practice, amid the stress of their loved ones being away. Phyllis Vanhorn, a young quilter who moved to Trenton Ontario in 1942 explained the importance of her quilting group to her saying:

There was a benefit to the women individually, and there was a benefit to the women in the group setting. So we know that stitching by hand is repetitive and can be a very meditate [sic] activity, which is soothing to our spirits. But I believe that gathering together in the community, meeting together provided another layer.

⁶ “Knitting for Victory,” Elinor Florence Blog. Accessed April 14, 2026, <https://www.elinorflorence.com/blog/wartime-knitting/>.

⁷ “The Red Cross and Knitting for the War Effort,” Oshawa Museum. Accessed April 14 2026, <https://oshawamuseum.wordpress.com/2022/07/15/the-red-cross-and-knitting-for-the-war-effort/>.

⁸ Don Schweitzer, ed., *The United Church of Canada: A History* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2012), 62.

⁹ Scott, *Canada Knits*, 34.

¹⁰ “Knitting for Victory.”

Another element to this, where women could meet with each other, talk about their week, talk about what was going on, share tips, help each other learn to stitch.¹¹

It is challenging to gain a full picture of the importance of this work to the women participating as most of the experience lives in a dramatically aging oral memory. In reflection on her research into the legacy of women like Vanhorn, Joanna Dermenjian lamented, “suddenly we look back and go, oh, we never really talked about this. We never learned from this. We never made a record of this.”¹² This experience of poor record keeping is not unique among United Church of Canada stories but the preserved information is likely even more sparse due to the lack of importance placed on not just the work of craft itself but also the people doing it. In many ways this societal view on women’s work during the war makes it even more notable, the work was done without expectation of recognition. It was enough to be allowed to help. However, the theological implications of this work goes beyond how the work was experienced at the time. As Phyllis Vanhorn recognized, crafting, through its repetition, is a meditative process. This process would have been incredibly important in the anxiety of wartime as art can help us face things and express things that are larger than words. As the women made garments for both those they loved at war and those they did not know but knew needed help, they stitched their care and prayers into every movement. The finished object became an embodied prayer.

The United Church Women (UCW) was formed in 1962 from amalgamating the Women’s Missionary Service and the Women’s Association, formerly the Ladies Aid, alongside other women's groups within the UCC.¹³ The organization was created to bring the work of women formally into the work of the broader church; until this point the women’s organizations were separate from the UCC.¹⁴ The new organization formally

¹¹ “Canada’s Forgotten Quilts,” Haptic and Hue. Accessed April 13, 2026, <https://hapticandhue.com/canadas-forgotten-quilts/>.

¹² “Canada’s Forgotten Quilts.”

¹³ *UCW Handbook: Constitution, Guidelines, Policies, and Resources for United Church Women* (United Church of Canada, 2025), https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/handbook_ucw.pdf.

¹⁴ Phyllis Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 77.

became a part of the United Church of Canada and the new national organization adopted the same organizational structure as the national church. The UCW is still active today and has participated in dozens of national and local campaigns, many of which were based around craft.

In 1990 the UCW participated in the Reunification Ribbon project to help create a visual symbol of the people of North and South Korea's hopes and dreams of reunification. The UCW joined this campaign through its connection to the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea and began making ribbons alongside their efforts. The UCW would cut, shape, and write messages of hope on the ribbons during their meetings to send to South Korea. The ribbons were to stretch from the border over 48km to the Independence Gate in Seoul.¹⁵ Once all of the ribbons were made, a human chain stretching the whole distance formed and left the ribbons behind. Although Korea remains divided the ribbons were still up as of 2012 reminding all who see them of the lingering hope that they will finally be unified. The project was extremely meaningful to the participants not only in Korea, but also within the UCW. An unsigned reflection on the project said, "the ribbons are also a reminder that the UCW women take the witness pillar of their purpose to heart. To stand in solidarity with Korean women through this ribbon campaign was a witness to the connectedness of women around the world."¹⁶ This project is an example of activism through craft. Through the hands of women globally we can hope to edge the needle towards the expansion of peace and love.

One of the most referenced UCW campaigns is the Beads of Hope. The Beads of Hope was a national campaign by the United Church of Canada that ran from 2002-2004 to raise money and awareness for HIV/AIDS. Although this was a denomination-wide effort, the UCW raised a significant amount of the 2.3 million collected over the course of the campaign.¹⁷ The beads themselves were made by women in South Africa and sold in order to help raise the funds alongside donations.¹⁸ This model demonstrated the United

¹⁵ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 42.

¹⁶ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 43.

¹⁷ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 77.

¹⁸ *Faith-Based Organizations Addressing HIV/AIDS in Canada: A National Framework* (Canadian AIDS Society, 2014), <https://www.cdnids.ca/wp-content/uploads/Faith-Based-Organizations-2014.pdf>.

Church's efforts to work in partnership rather than in its historical mission/charity model that many would associate with international church efforts. The campaign ended with 15 UCW members travelling to Zambia for an educational visit to "learn first hand of the impact of HIV and AIDS on individuals, churches and communities there."¹⁹ The trip was extremely impactful on the women. Fannie Hudson, a participant on the Zambia trip, writes that her "days in Africa had been a very emotional time of witness."²⁰ She embarked on the trip with the goal of walking alongside the people they would meet.²¹ In this project the craft was not the end goal unto itself - it was used for fundraising. However, more than money came from the project. The UCC engaged in a true partnership with women in Africa who were given fair wages for their work and gave the church an opportunity to help where it was needed most. This model of partnership can be found in other fair trade programs in the United Church today as well as a deep rooted fair trade morality that is seen as close to the heart of the organization as its salary discussions of local livable wages.²²

The Alberta and Northwest conference of the UCW held a rally against child poverty on the steps of the Alberta legislature in 2008 as a part of their Child Wellbeing Initiative.²³ This action inspired Carolyn Pogue to create a 16 inch doll to represent a child living in poverty, thus creating the first Poverty Doll. The pattern was then passed through the presbyteries of the UCW and by the 2010 conference 210 dolls with pertinent messages tied to their wrists were presented to be blessed. The Poverty Dolls were subsequently placed on the desks of all 83 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of Alberta on November 18th 2010 to remind them of their duty to produce a child poverty reduction strategy.²⁴ The UCW also presented all 28 of their Members of Federal Parliament (MPs)

¹⁹ "Debates of the Senate (Hansard): 3rd Session, 37th Parliament, Volume 141, Issue 18," Senate of Canada, last modified March 9, 2004, https://sencanada.ca/en/content/sen/chamber/373/debates/018db_2004-03-09-e.

²⁰ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 49.

²¹ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 47.

²² Bob McKeon, *Faith-Based Organizations Engaged in the Social Economy in Western Canada* (B.C.-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance, 2009), <https://auspace.athabascau.ca/bitstream/handle/2149/2523/?jsessionid=AE868D661A21568DAB639983C04A660D?sequence=1>; *Minimum Salaries and Reimbursements for Ministry Personnel* (United Church of Canada, 2026), https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/2025-10/salary-schedule-ministry_2026.pdf.

²³ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 52.

²⁴ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 53.

with Poverty Dolls shortly before the Toronto G8 summit in 2011. The Poverty Dolls were not the only component of the campaign, the UCW worked across the country to write letters, make media appearances, give local presentations, and, of course, pray. Gerry Dyck sums up their reflection on the campaign by expressing positivity: “We wish to call our dolls “Hope,” as we hope for a better future for the marginalized children of Alberta.”²⁵ Similar to the Reunification Ribbons, the Poverty Dolls is another example of a craft project used for activism. In this case the goal was to force community and governmental leaders to face that there are real children behind their policies. Alberta released their poverty reduction strategy in 2013, as such it is clear that these efforts from the UCW had significant impact on the legislature as when the Poverty Doll campaign began the province had no plan to engage with such legislation.²⁶

UCW members have also reached great success in crafting local projects. In 1997 Pickering Village United Church in Ajax launched the Bunny Power 2000 campaign to raise money for Sleeping Children Around the World, a congregational favourite charity. The UCW created bunny-grams, greeting and special occasion cards that would be sold to raise money. The goal was \$2000 by 2000 by selling the cards for \$5, a total of 400 bunnies.²⁷ The campaign took off faster than the UCW members could have imagined and soon they were taking suggestions for specialized bunnies from teachers to pumpkins to even a new years bunny. Their reach became so widespread that multiple local companies ordered groups of 75 or 100 bunnies and their cards ended up as far away as Australia and Holland. By the end of the campaign the congregation had made 6,246 bunnies, raising \$31,260 which was able to provide 1,041 bed kits to children in need.²⁸ Doreen Hallé finishes their retelling of this story by mentioning how important it was to the group that not only were they able to raise money for an important organization, but they were also able to spend so much time

²⁵ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 54.

²⁶ *Together We Raise Tomorrow: Alberta's Poverty Reduction Strategy* (Government of Alberta, 2013), <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/11df4303-b795-4c7d-a2bf-5dc1c70fdf24/resource/28faa2ba-8242-4f10-af69-94e8be659a73/download/6881615-2013-together-we-raise-tomorrow-albertas-poverty-reduction-strategy-2013-06.pdf>.

²⁷ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 161.

²⁸ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 162.

crafting together. The joy they felt in their time together was spread to the recipients of the cards as they still hear stories from card receivers over 11 years later.²⁹

Master Cpl. Mark (Izzy) Isfeld was deployed on a UN Peacekeeping mission in Croatia when he was moved by the children he encountered having no belongings or toys. He asked his mother back in Canada to make dolls so that he could give them to the children he encountered. In 1994 Mark Isfeld was killed at 31 in a landmine explosion. His battalion and mother continued his mission in his memory and the movement has spread.³⁰ Izzy Dolls have been knit by many organizations and individuals across Canada, including the UCC. It is estimated that nearly two million dolls have been gifted in the 30 years since the project was started. Today knitters can drop off dolls at participating United Churches like Rideau Park in Ottawa to be sent to children in war zones across the world.³¹ Just like the love and prayers knit into the socks of the soldiers in World War Two, children receiving Izzy Dolls hopefully feel the love and prayers knit into the dolls brought to them by peacekeeping forces today.

As the UCW has seen a significant decline in its membership alongside the broader integration of women in the United Church of Canada, craft groups are no longer primarily a UCW endeavor. Since the late 1990s a new form of craft group has emerged throughout the UCC, prayer shawl making groups. These prayer shawl groups have become one of the most widespread modern crafting ministries. The prayer shawl movement was founded by Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo in 1998 in the United States. Bristow and Cole-Galo were students in a Women's Leadership Institute certificate program when a classmate asked their class to pray for her dying husband. The class gathered around her and laid on hands. Bristow and Cole-Galo noted that at that moment their classmate was wearing a brightly coloured shawl and they assumed that this prayer might make that shawl even more meaningful for her. They however did not predict that when they attended the funeral of their classmate's husband that the shawl would be used prominently as the altar

²⁹ Boughton, *Ordinary Heroes*, 162.

³⁰ Annie Bergeron-Oliver, "Threads of love: How knitters are bringing comfort to children in warzones," *CTV News*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/article/threads-of-love-how-knitters-are-bringing-comfort-to-children-in-warzones/>.

³¹ Bergeron-Oliver, "Threads of love."

cloth.³² It was out of this realization of how meaningful a garment can become when it is imbued with the care of the community that the prayer shawl movement was born.

Prayer shawl groups most commonly meet regularly, often monthly, and craft shawls as a group with the purpose of blessing the shawls and giving them to other congregants and community members in need. Mary Elizabeth Piercy writes about UCC prayer shawl groups in her master's thesis *Shaping Post-Christendom Spiritual Practice in the United Church of Canada One Prayer Shawl at a Time*. Her thesis interviews six prayer shawl groups across Southern Ontario about why they participate. She has organized her findings on the significance of prayer shawl groups into three themes: benefit during life transitions, a theology of blessing, and non-threatening outreach in an increasingly secular society. Piercy notes that not only were the shawls helpful to recipients in times of life transition, but that many of the makers joined the groups as a result of life transition. Some of the most common transitions were becoming widowed or moving.³³ Crafters often joined the group seeking a way to be helpful to others but quickly found community. Dedicated time with other volunteers who share common interests and care for the broader community has been critical to participants feeling less alone in their struggles. It also wasn't uncommon for long-term participants to find newfound meaning in the work of creating prayer shawls after a life change. One participant notes that she didn't truly understand the impact of the shawls until her family became recipients. She got to see firsthand how important the gifted shawl was to her dying mother, then experienced how meaningful the shawl was personally after her passing.³⁴ The second pillar of Piercy's findings was that prayer shawl knitting is infused with the process and effects of blessing. Piercy explains, echoing the reflections of wartime crafters discussed above, that stitching is a meditative process. As the crafter meditates on the person the item is intended for, they create an embodied prayer by continually bestowing blessings on their materials and

³² Mary Elizabeth Piercy, "Shaping Post-Christendom Spiritual Practice in the United Church of Canada One Prayer Shawl at a Time" (master's thesis, University of Winnipeg, 2021), 2.
<https://share.google/IU2MOTm8NaxYEVhV5>.

³³ Piercy, "Shawl," 20.

³⁴ Piercy, "Shawl," 23-24.

actions.³⁵ This intention-filled creation of the prayer shawl imbues it with the blessing of the knitter, the congregation, and the Spirit. This blessing is then clearly felt by recipients, both intentional and beyond the intended scope of the shawl. The Aurora Shawl Group interviewed tells of a story when one of their shawls was picked up second-hand from a thrift shop. The purchaser contacted the shawl group from the label on the shawl and told them that the shawl had become meaningful and thanked them for creating it.³⁶ This story also lends itself to Piercy's thoughtful conclusion: prayer shawl groups are successful in the modern context of the United Church of Canada because they offer concrete ways to interact with the big questions and issues of life without being too theologically intimidating. Many of the participants expressed that they felt the prayer shawls were approachable ways to express their concern, love, and faith to the low-religious or non-religious people in their lives.³⁷ Although prayer shawls have prayer in the name and often come with expressed prayers, they don't come with strings attached. Most prayer shawl groups found the shawls had surprisingly warm receptions among people who otherwise would not welcome other forms of prayer or explicitly Christian outreach. Piercy postulates that this warm welcome may be due to the fact that the shawl does not require prayer by the recipient, it is already imbued with the prayers and care of the community.³⁸ Although this appreciation of prayer shawls does not go unnoticed by participants, it is unlikely to be the only reason this work is so popular. Many come to religion seeking answers to questions that have no answers, feeling emotions that are beyond what the human body can express, and understanding that there are things that cannot be put into words. Prayer shawls dive directly into those moments when we are the most vulnerable, and through these groups, participants find community and a new form of expression: craft.

In Paris Paloma's most recent single *Miyazaki* she expresses her disdain for AI in the art industry and her love of creating. She sings that her art is the only way she can process and interpret the world around her:

³⁵ Piercy, "Shawl," 37.

³⁶ Piercy, "Shawl," 51.

³⁷ Piercy, "Shawl," 65.

³⁸ Piercy, "Shawl," 66.

In grief's fertile land, the space in between clapping hands
They say it'll pass, I used to pray that it would
But its absence never brought anything good
I wake in the morning, do all of my chores, then
Of thinking in silence, and drinking sweet wine
Putting my mind somewhere outside where it can feel the sun
Maybe it'll connect with someone³⁹

In this verse and throughout the rest of the song Paloma expresses that big emotions like grief don't belong trapped inside ourselves, and that often the only way to put them “outside where it can feel the sun” is through creating art. Craft groups from prayer shawl ministries to activists making dolls to wartime knitting groups have been setting their emotions in the sun for as long as the United Church of Canada has existed and it is clear that through their efforts we have connected to other people better.

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Ministry as a System Architect in God's Open-Source Network

Shawn LePage

For PF 1001 Pastoral Foundations

This metaphor of ministry as a system architect in God's open-source network reveals ministry as a creative collaboration, relating connections and the Spirit-led repair within the Body of Christ. In open-source systems, people collectively write, share and refine the code, contributing to a living project that no one owns but all sustain. Likewise, Christian ministry is a communal and ongoing calling in which the minister works within God's design while enabling others to contribute their unique gifts. Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner's *Network Theology* and Landon Whitsitt's *Open Source Church* suggest that such networked collaboration reflects the shared creativity of the Spirit. This paper will explore how the metaphor of ministry as a system architect reveals the minister's role as a creative coder, a caretaker of relationships, a spiritual debugger, and a co-laborer with God in the ongoing open-source project of the Kingdom.

Open-source culture provides a powerful lens for understanding ministry because it emphasizes transparency, collaboration, and shared ownership, values that parallel the life of the early Church. Whitsitt describes the open-source movement as one that "trusts the wisdom of the crowd"¹ and "invites everyone to have a voice in shaping the project"² a vision that resonates with Paul's image of the Body of Christ where each member contributes to the whole (1 Corinthians 12). In this light, ministry is not the work of a single expert maintaining control, but the shared labor of a community continually shaped by the Spirit's creativity. The minister, like a system architect, doesn't build alone but helps establish the conditions in which others can contribute, ensuring that the "source code" of the Gospel remains accessible and adaptable across contexts.

¹ Landon Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All* (The Alban Institute, 2011), 28.

² Whitsitt, *Open Source Church*, 33.

Campbell and Garner deepen this vision by describing Christian community as a “network theology”³ one that mirrors the relational and participatory nature of God’s own being. They argue that theology in a digital age must recognize that “connection and relationship are not merely human constructs but reflections of divine life.”⁴ Within this framework, the minister as the system architect does more than facilitate collaboration, s/he participates in the ongoing relational work of the Triune God. God the Creator is the ultimate architect whose design underlines all creation; Christ the Word is the living code through whom the design takes form; and the Holy Spirit is the dynamic energy sustaining and renewing the network. Ministry, then, becomes an act of joining in God’s creative maintenance of the system, building, connecting, and debugging alongside the Spirit to ensure the Body of Christ remains a living, responsive, and resilient communion.

Viewing ministry as participation in God’s open-source network expands our understanding of vocation beyond the clergy to include the whole community of believers. While the ordained minister may act as a system architect, designing frameworks, maintaining connections, and ensuring theological integrity, every member of the Church is called to be a contributor within God’s ongoing project of redemption. In open-source terms, parishioners are co-developers who adapt the Gospel’s “code” to new contexts, test its application in daily life, and share their insights for the good of the whole community. This vision echoes the Pauline image of the Church as a body where “each part works properly” to build itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16). The Spirit equips all participants with diverse gifts, ensuring that ministry is never a one-directional hierarchy but a dynamic collaboration in which leadership is exercised through service, discernment, and empowerment. In this way, the metaphor resists clericalism and reframes the minister’s identity, not as a gatekeeper of grace, but as one who nurtures the network, equips others to contribute, and trusts the Spirit to guide the collective toward God’s purposes.

The open-source metaphor also invites a missional imagination for those who have not yet joined the network of faith. In the digital world, open-source projects are not closed

³ Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Network Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Baker Academic, 2016), 1.

⁴ Campbell and Garner, *Network Theology*, 68.

circles but ever-expanding communities, always welcoming new contributors who bring fresh insight and creativity. Similarly, the Body of Christ is never complete; it grows as new believers are grafted into the network through encounter, witness, and grace. The minister, as a system architect, cultivates an environment of accessibility, translating the Gospel's "source code" into languages and practices that newcomers can understand and meaningfully engage. In this work, evangelism becomes less about recruitment and more about invitation: showing that the network's purpose is life, freedom, and participation in God's ongoing creative project. The Church, then, mirrors the open-source community at its best, a space where all are invited to learn, to contribute, and to discover that they were already written into God's design.

Yet not all accept the invitation to join the network. Some experience disillusionment with the Church, distrust its connections, or see no need for a network at all. In open-source terms, they choose to remain offline or to build separate systems entirely. Andrew Root observes that in a secular age, "the sense of a living, active God has been thinned out, replaced by hum of human activity and the glow of screens."⁵ Ministry, then, must approach such disconnection not as failure, but as part of the landscape of God's ongoing repair. The system architect doesn't abandon the unresponsive node, rather, they continue to monitor, listen, and ensure the lines remain open for when a signal might return. Pastoral ministry in this sense becomes an act of patient maintenance, embodying Christ's persistent love toward those who cannot or will not yet log on. For some, this means standing faithfully at the network's edge, bearing witness that the connection remains possible, and that grace, like bandwidth, is never exhausted.

When viewed through the lens of the open-source metaphor, the diversity of human response, connected, unconnected and resistant, reveals the richness of God's ongoing work in the world. The network is not merely a human project; it is sustained by the Creator, whose wisdom reinforces the "source code" of creation. Christ, as the living Word, embodies the principles of the network in action, inviting participation, modeling

⁵ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Baker Academic, 2019), 42-47.

connection and demonstrating persistent love even to those who resist or remain distant. The Holy Spirit functions as the dynamic energy of the system, equipping ministers and laypeople alike to contribute, to maintain relational integrity, and to witness God's presence in ways both creative and patient. This metaphor underscores that ministry is not about control or ownership but about collaboration, invitation and restoration; even when nodes appear offline or disconnected, the Spirit keeps the network open and alive. In this way, the Church mirrors God's open-source Kingdom: a living, adaptive and inclusive project in which all are invited to participate and to experience the life-giving power of divine connection.

In summary, envisioning ministry as a system architect in God's open-source network illuminates both the creativity and relational depth of the Church's calling. From the minister who maintains the system, to parishioners contributing their unique gifts, to those yet unconnected or resistant, the network reflects the breadth of God's ongoing invitation and the Spirit's sustaining work. This metaphor reveals ministry as collaborative, adaptive, and Spirit-led: calling not to control or dictate, but to nurture connection, repair what is broken, and invite all into God's life-giving project. Ultimately, the open-source network reminds us that God's Kingdom is never static, never fully "complete" and always open to new contributors. Ministers and members alike are participants in a divine project whose ultimate author, sustainer, and guide is the Triune God, and whose work continues long beyond any one node, one contributor or one generation.

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The Geography of Salvation and Ministry: A Reflection

Rev. Dr. David MacLachlan

If one thing is clear in the New Testament story of the final hours of Jesus' life it is the place or location of his death. The Synoptic Gospels locate the place of his death as the 'the place of the Skull' or Golgotha from the Aramaic. It is the final event in his earthly life and a place of abuse and ridicule culminating in the crucifixion itself. It is also the same place where two criminals are referred to as sharing Jesus' fate.

But the Synoptics are not the only documents that report the location of Jesus' death. John's Gospel also contains this scene in its passion narrative and agrees with the Synoptics that Jesus died at Golgotha. It also makes it clear that this place of misery and humiliation was "outside the city" and the soldiers take Jesus out to it (19:17-18). The city in this phrase is Jerusalem. This is obvious to those who knew where Golgotha was and probably why it was chosen as the place of crucifixion not only of Jesus but no doubt for many others in mid first century Israel. Crucifixion is also unmistakably a Roman method of execution not a Jewish one. It is Pilate the Roman authority figure here who has the last word on what will happen to Jesus a Jew. He tries Jesus and condemns him to death and then hands him over to the soldiers who oversee Jesus' carrying his own cross and "went out' to Golgotha.

At the same time Pilate also receives some push back about the sign he has placed above Jesus on the cross because of its location. It was "near the city" and so consistent with the references to the place and visible to people travelling into and out of the city of Jerusalem. According to John the Gospel writer, the Jewish authorities object to the sign posted above Jesus (19:19-21). The designation of Jesus as "King of the Jews" becomes a specific problem for the Jewish authorities because it is on a cross in plain sight of all. In John they complain to Pilate that the sign should be corrected to add "he said he was" the King of the Jews. Pilate refuses to amend the plaque for whatever reason and simply declares that what was said will stay.

As much as this aspect of the story of Jesus' death is obvious and well-known the place itself has received much less attention other than to keep its name current in Christian theology and consciousness. As much as Paul speaks about the cross of Jesus, for example, the geographical location of the cross is not much explored by him. If there is anything further to the 'geography' or location of the event of the cross it is not taken up much by later authors in the NT or even in early Christian tradition through the early centuries of the common era. It has mostly been used to signify Jerusalem as a place of wickedness and betrayal fueling hostility toward the Jewish people and its leaders extending well into the common era.

There are, however, two exceptions to this omission. Two NT authors pick up this location and make something of it as the place of Jesus' death. The one is the epistle to the Hebrews and the other is the Revelation to John. Both references have received some discussion in the literature so I will lift up just a few aspects in this reflection.

First, in the final chapter of Hebrews the author refers to the place where Jesus suffered as "outside the camp" and develops a metaphor for both salvation and ministry (13:13-16). Although this phrase picks up the parallel to the events described in and associated with this place in the Hebrew Scriptures (Exodus 33; Lev. 24), it is simply anachronistic to refer to it as outside the camp and not outside the city. We need not delve into these details here. We need only to note though that the place referred to in this letter is certainly the place of the cross where Jesus suffered and died and dealt with human sin (10:10), so salvific.

This is also the place where sacrifices pleasing to God through Jesus Christ can and should be raised. It is the acknowledging of God's name in a very unholy place. We could also say it is a service to the world to remind it as the Psalmist would put it: the earth is the Lord's and those who live in it (Ps. 24:1). The location or geography in the world then is a significant event. God saved the world in the world, in the very place according to the Gospel story where people were at their worst. This is God's salvific work in the place one would avoid at all costs and would in Paul's terms call the whole business foolish or nonsensical as a work of God. Neither is this a hopeless moaning about the misery of the

world or its abandonment by a holier people. The location now is a place where God's name can and must be praised and a place as well where we do not neglect to do good and to share what we have (13:16). The geography of salvation is also the location of ministry and service to God. The 'holiest place' is now very much in the world. It should caution us too about how much we make of other holy places which may be more attractive or pleasing in our sight. Though the author makes it quite clear that we have "no lasting city" here (13:14), in the meantime the readers should go outside the camp/city to give our service and praise in the same location as their Lord also gave and served (13:13).

We are to seek out places-I think Hebrews says-that have been deemed unholy or to be avoided either by decree or violence precisely in order to offer praises to God and to pursue the "doing of good" and human community building (koinonia). It is a challenge to how things are done in this world and yet it sits at the heart of what our faith calls us to be about and perhaps best summed up in the letter's benediction (13:20-21)

The second example of where the geography of salvation and ministry plays a role is the Revelation to John, last book of the NT. This author places the reference to the cross' location in his vision of the two prophets who "tormented the nations of the earth" (11:1-13). Location in the Revelation to John is a difficult topic because it changes frequently, almost every time the author says, "and I saw!" Nevertheless, some things remain firm and the one most important of these things is the throne of God and what takes place in John's visions around it. The two pesky prophets are an excellent example of God's and the Lamb's intrusion into the world's business. Their ministry and witness are described in grandiose, that is, prophetic terms and make clear that their witness will have a place and will be heard. Their presence and actions are very much in prophetic and metaphorical language for the author (fire from the mouth, power to shut the sky etc.). Their witness echoes the great prophecies of Elijah and the powerful liberating claims of a Moses and also challenge the world at its core, at least for this author.

For us here though two things in particular are to be noted. One is that these two characters stand in two places at the same time. The one place is before the Lord of all the earth (11:4). John is given the task of 'measuring' the temple at the beginning of the vision.

He does this but it comes out that what he is really doing is to ‘measure off’ the inner and the outer courts. And so the two prophets stand in God’s presence with the altar and those who worship there, and at the same time they also stand or work in the outer court which is given over to the nations. They will trample over the people of God (the holy city) for forty-two months.

Once their location is made clear in John’s vision of the temple then he can describe the location of their deaths. As soon as the time of their prophecy is completed the Beast rises up and kills them (shuts up their prophecies and witness). Their bodies lie in the streets of the Great City for three and a half days but what is important for our reflection is that their death is also exactly “where their Lord was crucified” (11:8). We may be tempted to say this evil city is Jerusalem mainly because of its designation as Egypt and Sodom and the Hebrew prophetic utterances in Isaiah 1 and Ezekiel 16, but, in my view, John has a wider vision and purpose here. The great City in my reading of this chapter is Babylon itself not Jerusalem, however disobedient. The Jewish prophets will look after that. Here our author is concerned about the nations of the world.

I would note too that for me neither Hebrews nor the Revelation give us warrant to accuse the Jews as the killers of Christ and assume that Jerusalem’s fall and the destruction of its temple is what is in their minds here. John’s designations of the great city are that it is Sodom and Egypt spiritually (*pneumatikōs*) and so places of evil, injustice and captivity. This is the ‘city’ in which their Lord was crucified, that is outside Jerusalem and ‘in the world’ among the nations and in the metaphorical place called Babylon in this book. It is also confirmed by the description of the city where the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations live. Even clearer is their designation as “those who dwell on the earth” (11:10, twice). If you want that city’s description, see chapter 18. It is in this city that these prophets prophesy and die.

So, location plays a big part in the visions in this book. We have focused on the place of the crucifixion again as the place of the two prophets’ death and that of their Lord, who is also the slaughtered Lamb and so the salvific figure in many visions (5:6ff.). At the same time John sees that place as the location of prophetic ministry and challenge

especially to the Devil's mocking reign and pseudo-power. This ministry does bring opposition indeed and at a cost. Nonetheless, God has the final word and raises God's servants to life again. A good story, but even more an invitation to ministry even in the heart of injustice, oppression and deception.

For John the prophetic ministry both of Jesus and his prophets emerges from the declaration of ownership in this chapter and it certainly is related to geography. The announcement is made with the seventh trumpet that the realm of the world is now the realm of "our Lord and his Christ" (11:15). Ownership of a place, metaphorical or not, plays a role here, though it does not stop the hostility or the conflict between God and the forces of the Beast and its followers/worshippers. It does, however, make clear to whom this world belongs including those who seem intent on destroying it. So, now creation, salvation and ministry have geographical implications in the Revelation.

Both NT authors then have made something of the locational or the geography of salvation and ministry for us all. It does not negate the usefulness of our treasured places such as churches or meeting halls, wherever Christians gather for worship, meals and fellowship. They have a role for John of the Revelation indeed (ch.2-3). It does mean, however, that even the 'holy places' we may designate are not as "holy" as the place of God's redemption of and in this world and equally now the true place of our ministry. Both are very much in the world in all its splendor and sinfulness.

Shepherding: Leading from Behind

Jacqui Moraal

For ST 2503 Retreat and Pilgrimage Leadership

Anne* (not her real name), a pilgrim on Camino Nova Scotia South Shore pilgrimage, introduced me to the term “sweeper”. A sweeper’s job is to make sure the no one and nothing is left behind on the trail. This idea of a sweeper resonated so strongly with me that I knew God had called me to assume this newfound role. No one told me to walk at the back or directed me to watch out for the slower paced pilgrims, but I knew this was my spot on the trail. That first day, walking with Anne, listening to her story, and discovering the exceptional challenges she faced was both humbling and inspiring. Anne’s story stirred a deep compassion in me which remained fueled and fed by additional observations of challenge and compassion throughout the pilgrimage. Leading from behind that first day, set the template in my heart and soul of the love and joy of what I discovered was a leadership style of shepherding. Shepherding is an ideal style of leadership for the pilgrimage context due to the theological and practical applications within this unique community. As such, shepherding, merits more than a mention in discussing pilgrimage leadership skills.

This essay will discuss the merits of the leadership style of shepherding, within the Biblical context, pilgrimage leadership, and community. Personal experience on the trail will highlight the advantages of a leading from behind or shepherding approach in practical and meaningful ways.

The theme of shepherding is prevalent in both the Old and New Testaments. God in all aspects of the Trinity encompasses this metaphor of the Good Shepherd through compassion, guidance, care, and protection provided by leading from behind. Leading from behind or shepherding was a common leadership style of biblical times. Both Moses and David shepherded sheep before shepherding people. “You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Ps. 77:20 NIV), the Psalmist writes. Jeremiah says, “I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified,

nor will any be missing,” declares the Lord (Jer. 23:4). The most popular Old Testament scripture, depicts God as a shepherd is Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” This imagery portrays feelings of protection, guidance, compassion, care, and love. Jesus adds a greater dimension to the image of shepherd when he says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Of course, there is no expectation of such an extreme act of love during the pilgrimage experience. However, being a servant leader in the style of Jesus is at the core of pilgrimage leadership.

For shepherding to be successful, leaders must bring with them their faith in God, faith in their community, and ensure that those who go out ahead are equipped for the journey.¹ Shepherding in pilgrimage requires participants that are capable and equipped to complete the path in their own rhythm and pace. Shepherding on the trail provides a sense of security and peace for those ahead knowing their leader supports and cares for them. This freedom and compassion build community bonds of trust and encouragement without the need for additional words.² The action of shepherding itself says, “you matter, you are capable, you are loved.” This is a most pastoral form of leadership where the leader walks with the participants for all or part of the day’s journey,³ matching their rhythms and pace, with words of encouragement or in silence, while being “guests within time”⁴ together.

These images of shepherding, of leading from behind, present the kind of selfless serving recommended for leaders during pilgrimage and the kind of leadership that follows the teachings and example of Christ. Mandela wrote that by walking behind, the leader “[lets] the most nimble go on ahead, whereupon the others follow”.⁵ This leadership style empowers the group and shifts the visibility of the leader from the forefront to the background while maintaining support and guidance for a collaborative community. In the article, “Dorothy on Leadership”, Brian McLaren writes about a “post-wizard” style of

¹ Erik Rees and Jeff Jernigan, *Tilt: Small Shifts in Leadership That Make a Big Difference* (Abingdon Press, 2010), 87.

² Katharine Rhodes Henderson, *God’s Troublemakers: How Women of Faith Are Changing the World* (Continuum, 2006), 82.

³ Henderson, *God’s Troublemakers*, 77.

⁴ Rob Fennell, *Camino Close to Home: How to Plan and Thrive on Local Pilgrimages* (Novalis, 2023), 46.

⁵ Nelson Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Abacus, 2002), PDF 42.

leadership.⁶ Shepherding encompasses attributes McLaren offers in post-modern leadership such as collaboration, problem solving, inclusion, listening, spiritual support, and love for others.⁷ Further, shepherding promotes the nine virtues of pilgrimage: community, sharing, serving others, perseverance, prayer, care of creation, patience, simplicity, and gratitude.⁸ All of these support the use of shepherding as a leadership style in pilgrimage.

While the sweeper obviously models shepherding, this leadership style is present throughout a pilgrimage. The first sign of a shepherding style of leadership was during our initial preparations for the pilgrimage event. After equipping us with information, discussion, and guidance from our classes, books, and professor, we stepped into new roles to begin preparations for the pilgrimage journey. Shepherding empowers team members to be autonomous in the roles and tasks which enhances problem solving, time management, and collaboration skills. This early preparation for the pilgrimage set the context of inclusion and appreciation of gifts which empowered the student leadership team to start the process of forming a community.⁹ The shepherding style of leadership trusts that the Spirit is at work and that the team members can navigate the twists, turns, and challenges of the journey before them.¹⁰

Although there are different motives for seeking pilgrimage, one motivation is to set aside holy, sacred, and intentional time for God.¹¹ We long to be in relationship with the Divine, creation, and others, yet finding time for deep relationships can be challenging in our busy lives. “Pilgrim sabbath is the gift of slowing down the usual frenetic pace and drawing down into the heart of God’s presence that is all around us.”¹² Pilgrimage gives us the gift of the moment, the stillness of being one with God and one another. Within the

⁶ Brian McLaren, “Dorothy on Leadership: Or How a Movie Can Help Us Understand the Changing Nature of Leadership in the Postmodern Transition,” *Rev Magazine* (November/December 2000): 3.

⁷ McLaren, “Dorothy,” 3-4.

⁸ Fennell, *Camino*, 27.

⁹ Rees, *Tilt*, 93-94.

¹⁰ Fennell, *Camino*, 101.

¹¹ Nancy Ferguson and Kevin Witt, *The Retreat Leader’s Manual: A Complete Guide to Organizing Meaningful Christian Retreats* (Discipleship Resources, 2006), 51.

¹² Fennell, *Camino*, 95.

unstructured community in the pilgrimage journey our focus shifts from the demands of daily living to the importance of relationship with others, with creation, and with the Holy Trinity. Spontaneous companionship is quite common on pilgrimages as other sojourners become fellow pilgrims in a shared sacred space of challenge. In this community we find ourselves waking up to the liminal and thin places of pilgrimage and open to divine encounters.¹³

As retreat leaders, we open ourselves to be shaped by God to better respond to the pilgrims we serve. 1 Cor 12:4-7 reminds us that the Spirit works for good of all by dispersing gifts to benefit the whole.¹⁴ When we shepherd in a collaborative context, others can contribute their unique gifts as well. We find ourselves in the joy of “collective wisdom”.¹⁵ Within the thin spaces, a term coined by Celtic Christians to depict the closeness of the Spirit of God,¹⁶ is fertile ground for God to mold and shape us in new and unimagined ways.¹⁷ I experienced this on the trails of the Camino Nova Scotia’s South Shore route.

The Holy Spirit nudged me on that first day on the pilgrimage trail to fall back and take a leadership position from behind. Perhaps forgotten knowledge informed me about the importance of walking at the end. Perhaps it was experience in raising children or leading youth and children’s activities. Perhaps, it was just instinctual. However, I am inclined to believe it was the movement of the Spirit, the nudge of the Divine, silent direction from God to slow my pace and walk with those at the back of the pack. From this vantage point I could survey the flock ahead of me and notice as the group thinned and spaced out along the trail. I was aware early that those with a slower pace would soon separate from the rest of the group and was able to anticipate and match my pace so that I did not pass them but rather joined them. As a leader, I discovered the joy of the slower pace, the reward of listening deeply, companionship in silence, and the benefit of sharing a tough journey.

¹³ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You Are Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 15.

¹⁴ Ferguson, *Guide*, 32.

¹⁵ Henderson, *God’s Troublemakers*, 83.

¹⁶ Beaumont, *How to Lead*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

Supporting pilgrims on their journeys is the holy work, the “holy hospitality” of pilgrim leadership.¹⁸ For many pilgrims and leaders, it is the relationships built during the pilgrimage experience that are the high point of their journeying¹⁹ and when the day lengthens and the walking becomes challenging, pilgrims discover their own personal strength and the strength and gifts of others.²⁰ Those forced – through blisters or fatigue or just a slower pace – to fall behind will discover that others will match their pace and walk with them through the difficulties of the trail,²¹ the Holy Spirit at work in the pilgrimage journey.²² It is at these times that shepherding styles of leadership are most valuable. The shepherd watches over their flock and comes to the aid of those in need. Sometimes with water, sometimes with first aid, sometimes with encouragement, and sometimes with silent companionship. Walking with people through difficult or challenging times creates powerful bonds held deeply by the work of the Good Shepherd within us. These deeply forged bonds contribute to a powerful sense of community.

On the third day of pilgrimage, I had the honour of walking with a group of pilgrims who were struggling. They had walked all morning, and I joined them at noon. One had blisters, one hip pain, another sore tight legs, and the last one had chosen to walk at the back with them. Together we kept pace with one another and discovered the shared rhythm of our footfalls. Sometimes we were silent, but mostly long stories emerged, creation beckoned, companionship deepened. We brushed a million ants off one pilgrim who chose the wrong place to sit. And I took turns walking, always at the back, with whoever was lagging for the moment. No one left behind.

Shepherding works well in the pilgrimage environment because the goals are clear and expectations are achievable. That way, leaders can step back and let others take the lead.²³ Leaders allocate tasks and then allow team members to take ownership and hone their own skills. Creating an environment of managed risk lets participants expand their

¹⁸ Fennell, *Camino*, 111-112.

¹⁹ Ibid, 57.

²⁰ Ibid, 58.

²¹ Fennell, *Camino*, 28.

²² Ibid, 58.

²³ Rees, *Tilt*, 87.

comfort zones and evaluate their own abilities.²⁴ The guidance and support aspect of shepherding allows leaders to offer advice or resources when required. This connects the group, allowing them to bond deeply, while the leader's skills are focused on each challenge as it presents.²⁵ In our role as pilgrim leaders, our call is to serve others and give our energies towards the pilgrims' success.²⁶ From the back of the trail, leaders are also led,²⁷ creating a companionable environment in which to listen deeply and engage in the spiritual stillness found on the trail.²⁸

Leadership author, Katharine Rhodes Henderson, writes, "A leader is a person who creates community."²⁹ Community is at the heart of the pilgrimage and shifting the focus of leadership to the background facilitates the community experience. Community flourishes best in an environment of *agape* love: love inspired by God through the work of the Spirit; love that reaches to others first, honours all, and empowers others.³⁰ Author, Susan Beaumont writes about the *communitas* of pilgrimage, the spontaneous sacred space of community where sojourners bond in warmth and inclusion and experience the thin places of Divine encounters.³¹ It is within this rich liminal environment, that the leadership style of shepherding³² is most beneficial and practical.

We can only achieve sincere community when the overarching element is a true abiding interest in the welfare of others that emulates God's abiding love for all people.³³ Pilgrimage community, through the movement of the Holy Spirit, tends toward this style of Christian community. A sense of belonging in the community is a significant element of pilgrimage.³⁴

²⁴ Ferguson, *Guide*, 115.

²⁵ Henderson, *God's Troublemakers*, 82.

²⁶ Rees, *Tilt*, 150.

²⁷ Richard Stengel, "Mandela: His 8 Lessons of Leadership," *Time* (July 9, 2008).

²⁸ Beaumont, *How to Lead*, 25.

²⁹ Henderson, *God's Troublemakers*, 78.

³⁰ Rees, *Tilt*, 92.

³¹ Beaumont, *How to Lead*, 15.

³² Mandela, *The Long Walk*, 41.

³³ Ferguson, *Guide*, 28.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

Ferguson and Witt share in *The Retreat Leader's Manual* that “Christian community is born out of the love and acceptance the members offer to each other, made possible by the love and acceptance they have known in Jesus Christ.”³⁵ Shepherding models the values of the group and facilitates community through active involvement with the participants. Pilgrimage community forms by the movement of God in the very acts of leading, caring, loving, and serving others.

A shepherding style of leadership was also evident in the way the leaders prepared the pilgrims for the day. Equipping them with nourishment for both body and spirit through food, blessings, scripture scrolls, maps, emergency contact numbers, and encouragement. Then launching them confidently into their day. However, leadership did not end when the pilgrims departed. Leaders continued to care and serve through behind-the-scenes activities for meals, locations, water, and walking alongside the pilgrims on their journeys. These acts of caring and service, allowed room for the Holy Spirit to nudge us into new spaces of being servants of God. In our challenges of leadership authentic opportunities arose to be more committed as Christians, to let God mold us into more loving and compassionate pilgrimage leaders”³⁶

When using a shepherding style of leadership, it is important to know when to take the lead.³⁷ Leading from the back is not suitable when crisis situations arise or when participants are inexperienced or incapable. Good shepherds need to know when to intervene directly with threats or behaviours that threaten the good of the flock or the pilgrims. Leading from the back is not passive or disengaged leadership but instead pastoral and watchful looking to the needs of all. Shepherding requires the right environmental context, people who are competent in their tasks, and a shared community of trust and caring.³⁸

On our last day, shepherding from the back of the group allowed me to alert the group that someone was in trouble and in need of assistance. I stayed with the pilgrim as

³⁵ Ferguson, *Guide*, 61.

³⁶ Ibid, 28.

³⁷ Henderson, *God's Troublemakers*, 79.

³⁸ McLaren, “Dorothy,” 4-5.

the message made its way person to person to the front of the group. In those moments of waiting was the understanding that not one of us was alone but all were held in the companionship of the pilgrimage community formed by the movement of the Spirit and the love nurtured by our service to each other in an emulation of the shepherding leadership of God. We had created a caring community fostered by the theological leadership style of shepherding.

Shepherding contributed to our community by the very act of presence. Pilgrims I never walked with expressed appreciation that I was at the back of the trail, “just in case”. Just in case they left something behind. Just in case they needed assistance. The pilgrims I walked with expressed feeling cared about such as, “You being here just helped me keep going” and “knowing you would stay with me made it okay to rest for awhile” and “I didn’t have to feel like I was holding anyone up when I needed to slow down.” For me, the best part of leading from behind was offering my best self to the pilgrims on the trail.

The unique structure of the pilgrimage context introduces an environment that is spiritual, communal, challenging, creative, and empowering. Those who enter into the experience come prepared for the journey and for the opportunity to live in community with others. Using a shepherding leadership style in pilgrimage emulates an ancient and holy style of leadership that God modelled for us to follow. More importantly, the pastoral and biblical aspects of a shepherding leadership style adds a deeper dimension, a holy and divine role model to emulate, that of the Good Shepherd, Jesus. Pilgrimage leaders need to approach this liminal time, this transitioning time, trusting in the abilities of the participants and motivated to serve with compassion and generosity. In these circumstances the leadership style of shepherding is ideal for facilitating a meaningful and authentic pilgrimage community experience for both leaders and participants.

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“How do you think I’m feeling?” Grief Theory Grounded in Attachment Theory as a Guide to Pastoral Care to Complicated Grief at a Funeral

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For PT 3149 Dying, Death, and Grief

Purpose of this paper

This paper considers the scenario of a family affected by a sudden death while on an extended milestone family holiday in a foreign country. The deceased, “Darlene,” was a twenty-something female traveling with her fiancé’s family and engaged to be married months later. She worked in hospital as a registered nurse and as a respite provider for an infant boy. At home were her mother, father, and two siblings, one of whom would require lifelong assistance for personal care.¹

A few days after returning home, the brother of Darlene’s fiancé, “Brett,” set up an online “Go Fund Me” page in order to raise money to repatriate Darlene’s body and ensure associated costs were covered. Brett had neglected to coordinate this with Darlene’s parents. By the time the fundraising campaign reached tens of thousands of dollars within the first day, both Brett’s and Darlene’s mothers had become angry, suspicious of one another, and defensive. Communication withered.

Ten days after Darlene’s death, her father had a massive stroke. He died the following day in the hospital where her daughter worked. At his time of death, he was barely over 55 years old. The family and friends thought that the grief for his daughter had killed him. His widow, understandably, was beside herself.

Communication between the two families became strained, even hostile, prior to the jointly-held visitation. Two funeral officiants were engaged: one minister to conduct the daughter’s funeral, another to officiate her father’s service immediately afterward.

¹ For the purpose of the case study, this young woman who died will be called “Darlene” and her fiancé “Brett.”

Acute grief had been complicated by untimeliness of the death of a young person, the perception of preventability, and a perception of boundaries violation. This grief had been made complex by the subsequent sudden and untimely death of the deceased's father, complicating the grief exponentially.

Attachment theory concepts and principles applied to grief therapy models were applied in this case, with some observed positive effect.

The relevance of attachment theory to grief work

Through early attachment theory and its development, a number of psychosocial capacities that have been studied and which are seen to predispose a person to more or less adaptive coping when that person is faced with trauma and loss, or other adverse experiences (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). In particular, secure attachment styles have been associated with higher capacities for mentalization, empathy, emotion regulation,² behavioural and attentional flexibility, and epistemic trust (Luyten et al., 2020; Talia et al., 2022).

Mentalization refers to one's ability to become aware of and imagine one's own interior states, as well as those of other people, and develops in early childhood through the experience of an emotionally-attuned caregiver reflecting the child's emotional state back to them. Epistemic trust has to do with the ability to trust the world one perceives. Empathy develops through this developing awareness of and capacity to mentalize another's interior states. Diminished capacities for mentalization and empathy have been associated with reduced emotion regulation and coping capacity, as well as reduced epistemic trust.

The relationship between attachment theory and bereavement is established in this manner: attachment security leads to the child's ability to develop mentalizing capacity and epistemic trust, a child having seen the emotional attunement to themselves of their

² Emotion regulation is defined as, "the ability to be aware of, monitor, evaluate, and change one's own emotional reactions," Gratz and Roemer, 2004, cited in Kosminsky and Jordan, 55.

caregiver(s). Mentalizing both of oneself and others over time helps a person to learn to manage their own stress arousal (Fonagy et al., 1991). Mentalizing deficits, meanwhile, are associated with emotion regulation problems, which present complicating factors in the context of grief, trauma, and loss (Allen, 2013; Malik et al., 2014).³ These cognitive and emotional capacities are helpful—even essential—in the post-bereavement phase and work of the griever to reconstruct meaning and identity after a loss (Neimeyer, 2009; Attig, 2011).⁴ Where that reconstructive work is inhibited (or lacking), the complications of prolonged grief, maladaptive coping, and even disorders in the psychosocial processes start stacking up. Attachment styles thus have both a direct and an indirect effect on grief responses, with complications that may arise from insecure styles initiating hyperactivating or deactivating behavioural systems (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2009, p. 23, 2019; Kim et al., 2014).⁵ Some attachment styles help, and some styles aggravate.

Luyten, Campbell, and Fonagy (2020) have found that the capacity for epistemic trust and epistemic petrification are factors in the function of social communication—and, in particular, those occurring around traumatic events.⁶ Indeed, the whole person’s inner “network” of attachment memories remains the foundation of all further adult attachment patterns. Although they may change over time, in bereavement situations they tend to serve as an internal working model activated by the bereavement.⁷ Where the internal working model is triggered by a loss, the fear response can lead to a sense of exaggerated loss of safety and threat. However, a person’s behaviour will not necessarily be an indicator of this process: much depends on the attachment orientation in the first place, along with other cognitive and metacognitive processes such as those mentioned (e.g., emotion regulation, mentalization, epistemic trust, and behavioural systems). It is worth noting that deficits have been associated with almost all mental health disorders, and that

³ Kosminsky and Jordan (2024), 39. Examples include social hypersensitivity (cognitive) and aggression (behavioural).

⁴ Kosminsky and Jordan (2024), 32-42.

⁵ Phyllis Kosminsky and John R. Jordan, *Attachment-Informed Grief Therapy: The Clinician’s Guide to Foundations and Applications*, Second edition (Routledge, 2024), 106-107.

⁶ Luyten, Campbell, and Fonagy (2020), 91.

⁷ Shaver and Mikulincer (2021), p. 42, cited in Kosminsky and Jordan (2024), 52.

these may add to situations of complicated trauma, or even be a factor in historical complex trauma that is now complicating a current bereavement. How a person behaves in an acute trauma situation may be predicted as well as interpreted differently, depending on an assessment of their attachment orientation, according to this theoretical framework.

For counsellors and pastors, there is reason to be aware of potential further complications developing from a complex grief response exacerbated by other relational problems or even existing psychopathologies. In terms of attachment orientations, the preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful attachment organizations (Horowitz and Bartholomew, 1991), are less resilient and adaptive, often hypersensitive and prone to distortion of social information. Their oscillation between the “loss orientation” and the “restoration orientation” tracks that activate at the time of bereavement are essentially interrupted by the behavioural system (Stroebe and Schut, 1999, 2010). Other researchers have shown that the mesocorticolimbic dopaminergic circuit, the “reward system,” is the physiologic system that accompanies the management of stress in the case of securely attached persons (Hostinar, Sullivan and Gunnar, 2014; Strathearn, 2011; Swain et al., 2014).⁸ Specifically, as the securely attached person faces adversity, they turn to others expecting the attachment relationship will help supply the emotion regulation needed, both by proximity to the attachment figure as well as in the activation of the representations of those attachment figures. This in turn provides the positive chemical feedback of the mesocorticolimbic dopaminergic reward system—positive social interactions help to downregulate distress and discomfort and provide the dopamine and oxytocin associated with those attachments.

Different responses and interventions will be more supportive to people with different attachment styles. Kosminsky and Jordan advise: “understanding the nature of a person’s attachment can help us understand the nature of their grief and guide us in providing attuned and effective grief support.”⁹ They elaborate this claim by appealing to the Two-Track Model of Bereavement (Rubin et al., 2012)—a model for recognizing the

⁸ Cited in Luyten, Campbell, and Fonagy (2020), 93.

⁹ Kosminsky and Jordan (2024), 102.

oscillation between the biopsychosocial functioning that is affected by the shock of the loss, on the one track, and on the other track all those factors relating to the griever's relationship to the deceased and how it continues after death: "the attachment system is a biobehavioral system that is activated in response to threat (Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007)."¹⁰ Where their attachment figures are unavailable, the distress and discomfort will be greater, and their mentalization and epistemic trust levels reduced. Securely attached people, on the other hand, tend to reach out to others when stressed or dealing with adversity, and will naturally expect that others will be there for them, and also that they will be understood and validated when they do reach out.¹¹

In summary, those with insecure attachment styles will be at greater risk for grief overload, a term referring to the state of overwhelm and overstimulation of their systems by the conditions of grief, the results of which could manifest at all levels, including biological and physiological.¹² What might look like an adaptive focus on distractions in one case may actually be a maladaptive avoidance in others, for example in substance abuse, hypersensitivity to social information, and destructive aggression.¹³ In other cases, focusing on the loss may lead to a dysfunctional fixation and prolonged inability to return to moments of function. Disorganized attachments and anxious attachment organizations have been correlated with greater intensity of grief and in some cases developing into prolonged grief disorder, observable in things like disbelief in the death of their loved one, an extended period of non-acceptance of the loss, or a prolonged preoccupation with the loss that inhibits biopsychosocial functioning (Bahm et al., 2017; Bowlby, 1980; Sekowski and Prigerson, 2021; Thompson, 2010).¹⁴ Distortions in the behavioural system may also be activated and cause additional complications in bereavement and grief. Having some understanding of these dynamics can provide a pastor with the means to support and

¹⁰ Luyten, Campbell, and Fonagy (2020), 93, citing *Attachment and Loss*, Vol. 2.

¹¹ Luyten, Campbell, and Fonagy (2020), 93.

¹² Ibid., 109.

¹³ These factors are associated with disorganized attachment styles, also seen in higher rates for individuals with a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. Fonagy and Luyten (2016) and Levy, Beeney, and Temes (2011) cited in Luyten, Campbell, and Fonagy (2020), 94-95.

¹⁴ Summarized and cited in Kosminsky and Jordan (2024), 116.

guide in a manner that alleviates rather than aggravates the cognitive and behavioural systems already in a state of distress.

Discussion of Encounters with the Bereaved Before, During, and After the Funeral

First, I will describe actions and approaches taken. I had three visits with Brett and his family before the memorial service, followed by one lengthy visit afterward. Between these and the five hours spent at the visitation and funeral I was able to observe a number of changes in the behaviour and affect of primarily Brett and his mother and father. These observations led me to make suggestions for the memorial service, which was requested to be a strictly non-religious service. In many ways, this made the task seem much harder to me, as I had to be careful not to offend with any religious language or assumptions as to what might provide comfort and support during an acute moment of traumatic grief and the rapid oscillation between the loss orientation and the restoration orientation of bereavement.¹⁵

Brief check-ins, along with close observation, taking discreet actions to support immediate needs, and gently assessing emotional reactivity and regulation helped me to make suggestions for individuals' participation in the memorial service.¹⁶ These included building the order of service to plan the flow of music, focal points, flow, timing, and use of silence.¹⁷ In effect, I wanted to build a liturgical rhythm without it being a liturgy, offering ritualized elements, attentional breaks, attentional focal points, and signposts for when we were getting close to the end of the service.¹⁸ I also invited family to come forward to blow

¹⁵ Block (2015) writes about the significance of choosing words that are meaningful for the mourners.

¹⁶ I think the process I used might be similar to that termed as "marked mirroring," as described in Luyton, Campbell, and Fonagy (2020, 95) and with reference to the work of Gergely and Target (2007).

¹⁷ See Capretto (2015) for an account of the use of silence for attending to an empathic presence in the case of traumatic loss. In particular, Capretto advocates both therapeutic silence as well as the "use of empathic language [...] subversively to acknowledge the uniqueness of the griever's attachment history and mourning process." Both words and silence can help demonstrate respect for the alien nature of the new world after loss.

¹⁸ See Goodwin (2015) for the clinical significance of attending to various ritual elements in helping persons to process grief, therefore assisting them through the mourning process and avoiding complicated grief due to the absence of mourning.

out the candles at the end. I was guided here by wanting to respect the loss orientation of the bereaved, but also by the need to find the beloved person who had died through shared memories and hearing about them from others. I also wanted to toggle between moments in memory to being in the present, and to the anticipated pain of the future and the feelings of grief around knowing the world with Darlene in it had been lost with her death.

There were also complex factors affecting the complications around Darlene's death and the relationship with her family. Fiancé Brett had been diagnosed a few years earlier with a psychological disorder, which had resulted in a period of impulsive and destructive behaviours. In the weeks after Darlene's death, he acknowledged (and demonstrated) alternating between feelings of anger/rage and overwhelming sadness. He also reported feeling hollowed out, numb, panicked, while in other moments said he felt as if the deceased were communicating to him through sunsets, rainbows, and moments of synchronicity. His sleep was disrupted, with no more than three hours a night except for two nights before the memorial service was held, when he slept six hours. I had recommended that he book in with a psychologist for therapy without much delay, and he obtained a referral from his psychiatrist. When he thought of cancelling his intake appointment the day before the funeral, I suggested that he could still go and ask to speak about his worries for the funeral the next day, for his first visit.

Meanwhile, Brett's affect was mostly flat. We had four meetings during the third week of bereavement, with the third being the visitation and funeral (over five hours). During my first two visits, he would frequently crack his neck, somewhat aggressively, and often would stare into others' eyes. I thought bringing him back into the present moment might help. At such moments, I would ask him, "how are you feeling in this moment?" The first two times, he looked annoyed, like "how do you THINK I'm feeling!" The third time, he responded a little more authentically. On the day before the funeral, I said: "I know that you're feeling shitty. I'm not asking with the expectation that you are feeling good; I'm asking to know how *relatively shitty* you are feeling in *this* moment." This explanation seemed to make it easier for him to relate to me after that. He spoke about having difficulty accessing his feelings and that he worried whether he would be able to speak authentically

at the funeral, to do right by Darlene. He wondered out loud whether he had loved Darlene as much as she deserved. I guided him to using the feeling of bodily sensation associated with good memories to access feelings associated with those memories so that he could better describe them.

After my second visit, after seeing the memorial order of service developed, hearing some of the speeches and the poems recited, and having talked about some of his more intimate memories, Brett was able to craft a eulogy that included light humour, raw emotion, and honest testimony for what he was experiencing. When he read it the next day it had an admirable balance of levity, humour, raw pain, and longing.

I was concerned for Brett's mother, who also has been one of my longest and closest friends. Notably, Brett's mother had a similar distancing affect to the question how was she feeling, but, she did describe at length being overwrought at the sight of her son's grief. I was already familiar with their anxious attachment orientation; so, now, recalling the attachment organization styles and behavioural systems activations, I mainly tried just to be a calm, stable presence. When she spoke about Darlene's mother, I would respond with a comment about not being able to imagine what she must be going through, to lose both her daughter and her husband.

Darlene's mother, for her part, had not wanted to participate in any way in her daughter's memorial; she left it all up to Brett. Further, she had insisted that the visitations be held concurrently and that the services would be consecutive. I tried to engage with her before the funeral numerous times, including to meet with her, but she could not engage. She did speak with me at the visitation four or five times. At one point, I observed her other daughter become distressed by Brett's young, affable and extremely good-looking younger brother behaving like he was at a cocktail party, and I discreetly brought it to his attention. He became more subdued, and almost immediately the deceased's sibling calmed. Within about an hour she asked to read some lines during the service. At the end of the service I invited any interested person to come forward to extinguish Darlene's candles, which were to be gifted to the immediate family, and both Darlene's mother and sister came forward to blow one out.

My presence seemed to mean a lot to all of the bereaved parties, but in particular to Brett. I realized the day after the funeral that I had been an attachment figure for Brett and both of his parents. The following day, I spent a few more hours with the family in a more relaxed visit. It was a feel-good visit. My proximity had been not just appreciated but somehow helpful to their functioning and self-regulation, both in preparation for and during the visitation and funeral. During this fourth and final visit, they recalled good times, told some jokes, and also each shared desires and thoughts about returning to hobbies and interests (needle work, playing the bass guitar, and practicing art, respectively for mom, dad, and Brett).

Brett indicated twice during the final visit that he was anxious to know what time I would be leaving. He seemed to want me to stay as long as I could. I gave him the time of 4:00 and I stuck with it. This seemed to help him relax. Later, as I left, he expressed his appreciation in a very mature and heartfelt way. I was proud of the six-year-old boy I remembered at my kitchen table!

Summary

I relied on an attachment-informed theoretical framework for grief and bereavement to guide my interactions and planning for this family's pastoral care. I coupled this with forms of knowledge and intuition around the use of the liturgical and ritual rhythms and practices of a worship service in order to build a memorial that might engage all the senses, provide anchors and reprieves for cognition, attentional flexibility, and emotion, and accordingly to present an order of service with introductory and transitional phrases, ritual actions like candle lighting and laying of wreaths, personally-meaningful live music between intense moments, use of silence, focal objects, and the simple acknowledgement of the loss. I spoke briefly that, as difficult as this day was, there would be more difficult days—particularly on milestones and anniversaries—and that the community could support the family by reaching out at those times. I addressed the love

that the deceased had been part of, and which would continue in the people who loved her and cherished her still.

Many present expressed how meaningful they found the memorial service. The funeral director was somewhat effusive—he noted there was a lack of persons available to conduct funerals for people not affiliated with churches and not religious, but looking for a meaning they could not describe or even identify.

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A Mother's Experience with MAiD for her Daughter

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My reason for writing this

I presented an oral version of this article to Professor Jody Clarke's course on Death and Dying in 2025. I offer it now as a contribution to the discussion on MAiD for a wider audience. My personal perspective may shed light on some aspects of this controversial topic. Besides offering a narrative account, I will attempt to reflect theologically on this experience.

About me

I am mother of a daughter and a son. Now 82, I am a grandmother and great grandmother; I have a stepfamily with older children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. I live in Terence Bay, NS. After graduation in 1985, I was ordained deacon and priest in the Diocese of Nova Scotia and in 1990 transferred to the United Church of Canada. My worship home is now St. Matthew's United Church in Halifax. My ministry had a strong focus on pastoral care; this was well before MAiD became a possibility. I followed the development of this approach to living and dying without a personal stake although the rationale for this legislation resonated positively with me. The argument of "playing God" through MAiD (previously "euthanasia" or "assisted suicide") didn't hold water for me since I recognised that medical innovations have often kept human beings alive far beyond a "natural" time for death. In 2023-24 MAiD became a reality for me when my daughter was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

About my daughter

To understand Eleanor's decision to seek MAiD, one needs to know something about her life. She was born to loving parents in Wolfville, NS on December 19, 1971. She died in Halifax on May 26, 2024, at age 52. The elder of my children, Eleanor never married and had no children. She lived alone in Halifax for most of her adult life.

Education and Employment

BA SMU 1993 Psychology; Diploma in Medical Office Management, Compu College, 1994. Her employment as a medical administrator in family practices and for a neurosurgeon at the QE2 made her familiar with health and medical care. She had friends who were paramedics. She earned certification in Emergency First Aid and had completed some pharmaceutical courses.

Emotional and mental health

These aspects of her life contributed to her decision to seek MAiD. Eleanor was a difficult child; she struggled with mental health issues, which deepened as she grew older. In 2009, a counsellor whom I saw suggested she might have borderline personality disorder. The indicators were chronic anxiety and depression, dysregulated emotions, a tendency to manipulate others and to turn against those who did not yield to her way of thinking or acting, and financial irresponsibility. I was told not to tell her of this probable diagnosis. While she had years of counselling, she was never given this diagnosis; since she was an adult, I was never involved in the process. Various medications were prescribed for her anxiety and depression. I shared information about BPD with our family which helped us understand Eleanor. We recognized that she had a loving heart and loved her despite the troublesome challenges she often presented.

Cancer

In 2015, Eleanor had surgery for endometrial cancer. Surgical menopause intensified her depression. She was unable to work. This was a blow to her confidence and self-esteem. Despite disability benefits and the financial support of her parents, who also planned for her financial wellbeing after our deaths, she constantly worried about financial security in the present and for the future.

She attended a support group for first responders with PTSD. Her work in the health care system had become increasingly onerous and stressful. Belonging to a group with whom she felt alignment, along with the content, helped her cope. A counsellor referred her to group sessions run by an MD. These probably included cognitive behavioural therapy; we noticed improvements. She made several close friends through these programmes.

Her experiences of death

When Eleanor was about 30 the young ex-wife of a man whom she had been dating had an aneurysm and died. She supported him and his little girl while arrangements were made for donating organs and taking her off life support. More recently, she became close friends with an older woman in her apartment building; L. had developed kidney disease and made the choice not to have dialysis and to have MAiD when the time came. While Eleanor was not with L. when she died, this possibility made an impression upon her. By this time, Eleanor had experienced her stepfather's deteriorating health and last months at Camp Hill. She was present when he died in 2018. It was a tough day as his breathing was so laboured.

In 2021, her closest girl friend, T., became ill with undiagnosed symptoms. It was Eleanor who took her to ER yet again and insisted doctors get to the bottom of what was wrong. T. was diagnosed with lung cancer metastasized to bone cancer. Eleanor supported her in hospital and on discharge. T. planned to have chemo when she was stronger but, on

the day when she and her partner were to be married, she collapsed. Paramedics looked after her so she could go through with the ceremony before rushing her to hospital where she died later that night. A dramatic and traumatic experience. Eleanor and T. were approaching their 50th birthdays. A few weeks earlier, another dear, older friend of 25 years died from a brain tumour. She supported him and his partner during his decline. In February 2023, Eleanor's father died after a crisis in his health. She rose to the occasion, assisting with arrangements to fly him home from Florida, navigating his care and supporting her stepmother during his hospitalization. She was present at the time of his death.

Summer 2023

Eleanor and I spent a lot of time together at my home and on holiday in PEI. That summer, a plan was hatched that my sister from France and my brother and sister-in-law from Australia would come to Nova Scotia next April to celebrate my 80th birthday. Eleanor suggested the entire family enjoy time together somewhere large enough to accommodate us all. She located a house to rent for a long weekend. In October, she and I spent a few days at her favourite place, White Point Beach. During these weeks of companionship, she told me she had a lump at her navel which her doctor was investigating as a possible hernia. She told me of her fears that this might be cancer. If it was, she did not want to spend her days going to hospital for treatment but would prefer to live the best she could until she couldn't. She would want to have MAiD. On November 2, 2023, she had a CT scan in Antigonish. She drove with me beside her, aware of her anxiety expressed by her silence.

Diagnosis

A few days later she courageously went alone to her doctor for her scheduled appointment to hear the results. In tears, she phoned me: "This is bad, I'm at the hospital for blood tests, N. is with me, call Julian, please go to my apartment, and meet there". Julian, my son, received the news through her friend; as I drove to her apartment, he told

me to pull over and broke the shattering news- there were tumours all through her abdominal area. We had a very tearful time that afternoon.

Her Response

Eleanor reiterated her intention not to have treatment, and to request MAiD. Biopsies to determine the type of cancer took weeks; the first wasn't enough tissue. However, a specialist determined that surgery was not an option- the cancer was too widespread.

Preparing to die

At the first diagnosis, Eleanor immediately took control of her living and dying. Her decision was indeed to live the best she could until she couldn't. She was very organized: planned with funeral director, lawyer, executor, power of attorney, will, financial concerns. She had critical illness insurance which was a big help. During this time her friend of 20 years, a neurosurgery nurse, N., accompanied her as much as possible. She became Eleanor's Power of Attorney and Executor. Eleanor actually apologised to me that she wouldn't be there for me during my dying days. In addition to spending time together, my primary role was cooking for her and for N.'s family since N. was spending so much time with Eleanor.

In December she had an interview with Palliative Care and was assigned a team. Julian and N. accompanied her. She was told not to be too hasty in refusing treatment until she knew more, although all the indications were that the cancer was terminal. A referral to MAiD was made.

On December 19, she celebrated her 52nd birthday with a drop in party at home. I met friends I had not known and heard stories of her kindness.

On Christmas Eve she learned that it was metastasized endometrial cancer.

In January the gynecologist oncologist told her that only one chemo with problematic side effects might prolong her life a little. Eleanor declined. Prognosis was perhaps 6 months. There were two interviews with MAiD doctors for which I was present along with N. Their calm, compassionate manner impressed me as they talked with her, describing criteria, the process of MAiD and the decision-making. They clearly had her entire medical history since I noted the first doctor saying that she was not eligible for mental health reasons but only because the cancer was terminal. No date was set at this time. She and N. signed a form valid for 6 months giving her PoA permission to consent if she was incapacitated by the time MAiD was desirable. The second doctor, Head of MAiD, knew both Eleanor and N. through their work.

Planning a Celebration of her Life and Obituary

Eleanor had become disillusioned with church as a teenaged PK; as an adult she never allowed me to talk about faith with her. However, a friend invited her to Faith City Church in December; she liked the band music and immediately requested prayers through their website and later talked with one of the Pastors whom she liked. She attended regularly after that. The celebration of her life would take place at the funeral home.

She chose her favourite music, with the reasons for her choices indicated in the programme. Told me I could choose one hymn. I asked her what she remembered from childhood, and she immediately sang something she had learned in the Cathedral junior choir, “Yahweh is the God of my salvation”. A friend would sing this.

She agreed that my minister, Betsy Hogan, could participate with prayers along with the Faith City pastor who would give a homily. I put the service together with scriptures which she approved. Julian and a friend were to speak about her.

She began work on her obituary which I eventually wrote up for her in early May -her words and thoughts which she approved, with only a brief addition by me after her death. The obituary included her thank yous to many people for their role in her life.

Living with gratitude

This attitude became a focus after she met author Janice Landry at a PTSD event; Eleanor read her books emphasising gratitude and resilience in tough times. Janice gave her 6 tiny plastic ducks that became significant in representing each of the 6 friends who were amazing in those last months. Eleanor bought Janice's books as gifts and Janice came to her home to sign them with a personal note indicating their role in Eleanor's life. I helped put them in gift bags, learning about all the people to whom Eleanor was grateful. March 2, she threw a big party for herself. She regretted not having invited me, wishing that I had been there to enjoy the love shown to her. Her guests made the party a wonderful celebration! She had not been feeling well the day before, very tired with increasing pain. I was relieved that she had been able to enjoy this special time.

Easter (March 31) weekend she spent at my home. I did not know that this would be her last overnight stay with me, but we had some special moments. Unbeknown to me, she decided that weekend on a date for MAiD at the end of May, arranged partly for when one friend would be home from his work out of the province. Although she had not wanted to tell me of this decision until after my birthday, friends persuaded her that I should know and so with tears she broke that news to me a week later. Because she looked well, we wondered if she was planning too soon. However, she was suffering far more physically than she let on.

My siblings were glad to be with us at this time of both joy and sorrow, and to spend time with Eleanor. She was only able to make two short visits to the house we had rented, fortunately within easy distance from Halifax. By then, she could not drive, nor could she lie down in bed to sleep; the rapidly growing and multiplying tumours swelling her belly were causing too much discomfort. She slept in a recliner the rest of her life. The last weekend of

April, she had arranged to go to White Point to hear a musician friend perform there. She had booked a cottage for herself and friends; since it was my sister's last weekend with me, she had suggested that we join her. Then Julian decided he and his wife would come. A bittersweet weekend with very special moments.

Goodbyes

During the last 2 months she arranged goodbyes to her friends, giving them gifts and giving her possessions away. She had a calendar with everyone fitted in along with other appointments.

In May, we observed increasing deterioration. MAiD was set for Sunday May 26. To my surprise, on Tuesday of the last week she invited me, Betsy and the Faith City pastor for prayers. I was so impressed by their ministry to her, meeting her where she was. Betsy and I left to wait while the Pastor had time with her. He told us that she had asked for prayers for her friends. I was scheduled to stay overnight but that became too emotionally difficult for her and so a friend came.

On the Wednesday evening, she said goodbye to each of our family. A friend stayed overnight. I learned next day that her pain was so severe that the paramedics were called to administer morphine; she had arranged to be a "special patient", meaning that paramedics had immediate access to her medical record, did not have to take her to hospital and could stay until her situation stabilised.

Thursday, she had a final appointment with her family doctor with whom she had become very close. Friday, another friend drove her in his truck for her last visit to my home. They delivered her desk and a few other things. It was after she left that day that I sobbed my heart out.

Having accomplished the last thing on her list, she yielded to the disease. Next day, she could hardly walk or look after herself. Her organs were shutting down. Friends stayed with her; on Saturday morning they drove her to Lawrencetown beach. Sadly, an unfortunate incident due to BPD occurred that afternoon prior to my arrival. Eleanor was

sobbing so much that she could scarcely talk to me. She was still undecided about whether she wanted me to be present when she died.

Her death

Sunday she was persuaded that I should be there. Dr. was to come at 4:00. When I arrived at her building, I found friends crying in the parking lot and sought to comfort them. My friend who had driven me told me to remember I am the mother, not the minister, wise words! (Eleanor had given me strict instructions that I was not to drive myself that afternoon!)

I found 5 friends in her apartment. We sat in a circle of love around her, me beside her, holding her hand. She began to cry on my arrival and then pulled herself together- “no tears” she said, “I don’t want to talk about anything.” I had written a letter to her the night before and emailed it to N. asking her to read it to her. She was able to give her the gist, but it was too much emotionally to read in its entirety. We had light conversation: her ever sharp ears heard me whisper, “oh, I forgot to take off my shoes” and she ordered me to take them off! There was speculation as to what colour tie the doctor would be wearing-he had a reputation as a snappy dresser. (It was pink, Eleanor’s favourite colour, which he knew.) When Dr. G arrived, Eleanor’s first words were, “I’m ready”. He took time for introductions of each person, recognising me as Mom from the interview in January. He explained the procedure to us; said to Eleanor, “I assume you have all your marbles” (for consent) to which a friend responded, “oh, we found one on the floor – it’s on the counter” - they really had found a marble! Laughter followed. He asked Eleanor if she wanted to lie down in her bed; she explained that it was too painful; she would stay on the recliner.

As Eleanor fell asleep, a friend began singing her favourite song “Country Roads, take me home”. It was a relief for me to see all the tension go out of her body, total relaxation. The room was filled with profound grace and dignity, love and gratitude.

I had asked Betsy to come for prayers following Eleanor’s death. She came in immediately after she was pronounced dead; we were still in a circle of love around

Eleanor. Betsy was a huge comfort to me and the others. She waited with us until the funeral home staff arrived; when they were ready to wheel her body out to the car, we escorted her. Then Betsy kindly drove me to Julian's home.

After her death

I saw Eleanor at the funeral home two days later; read my letter written the night before she died and put it in her hands. There was a visitation on Wednesday and the celebration of life on Thursday. All was as meaningful as she wished it with her favourite music, prayers and loving words from others. Julian spoke of his sister with honesty and deep love. In November, family and friends went again to White Point where we committed her ashes to the ocean.

Theological reflection

That MAiD was the right choice for her I have absolutely no doubt. She knew she was going to die within months but could ask for MAiD if the disease became unbearable. She knew that a bowel blockage or blood clot could arrive at any time. That possibility of MAiD gave her the courage to live well knowing that she would not have to die in hospital. Setting a date took away the uncertainty that was so hard for her to live with because of her BPD. She died truly at peace in her home, having fulfilled her own wishes in that chosen time frame, and so close to a natural death. She could not have remained at home any longer; she would have been hospitalized. To see her relaxed and at peace slipping out of this world so easily was a gift to me. This was as sacred as any "natural" death, filled with profound grace and dignity, love and gratitude. While not recalling that she had been born on a Sunday, she had chosen a Sunday as the day of her death-to me the day of new life. Since she would never discuss matters of faith with me, I do not know exactly what was going on in her mind and heart, but I rejoice that she reached out to faith and to pastors. She made peace with her family; we readily forgave the BPD characteristics which had

caused us so much angst. She knew she was loved despite those hard times; although there were some rough patches in our relationships in those last months, we witnessed her courage and the goodness and love in her. All the facets of my daughter's life had become clearer making me proud of her and grateful to be her mother.

How did I cope with knowing that she would die with MAiD? I do not believe that a compassionate God is offended by her decision to take control over her dying by seeking MAiD on a certain date. I do not believe that she was avoiding any spiritual or emotional journey that she had not taken. Preparing my daughter's service and obituary was heart-breaking but it brought us together in mutual respect. It was weird to know exactly when she would die. I mourned her illness -horrible to watch her belly swelling with tumours- death would be her friend. We cried together, but mostly we tried to be strong for each other. I got through, as I have since her death despite the heartache of loss, because I was surrounded by the love of my family, Christian community, and friends. I had the constant support of Betsy, my minister. I was thus held in God's loving embrace, and freed to let her go when the time came. I knew that God's love would empower me to go on with my life, as, with love, respect, gratitude, relief for the end of her suffering, and even joy, I committed her life to the Holy Mystery at the Heart of the Universe who is Life and Love.

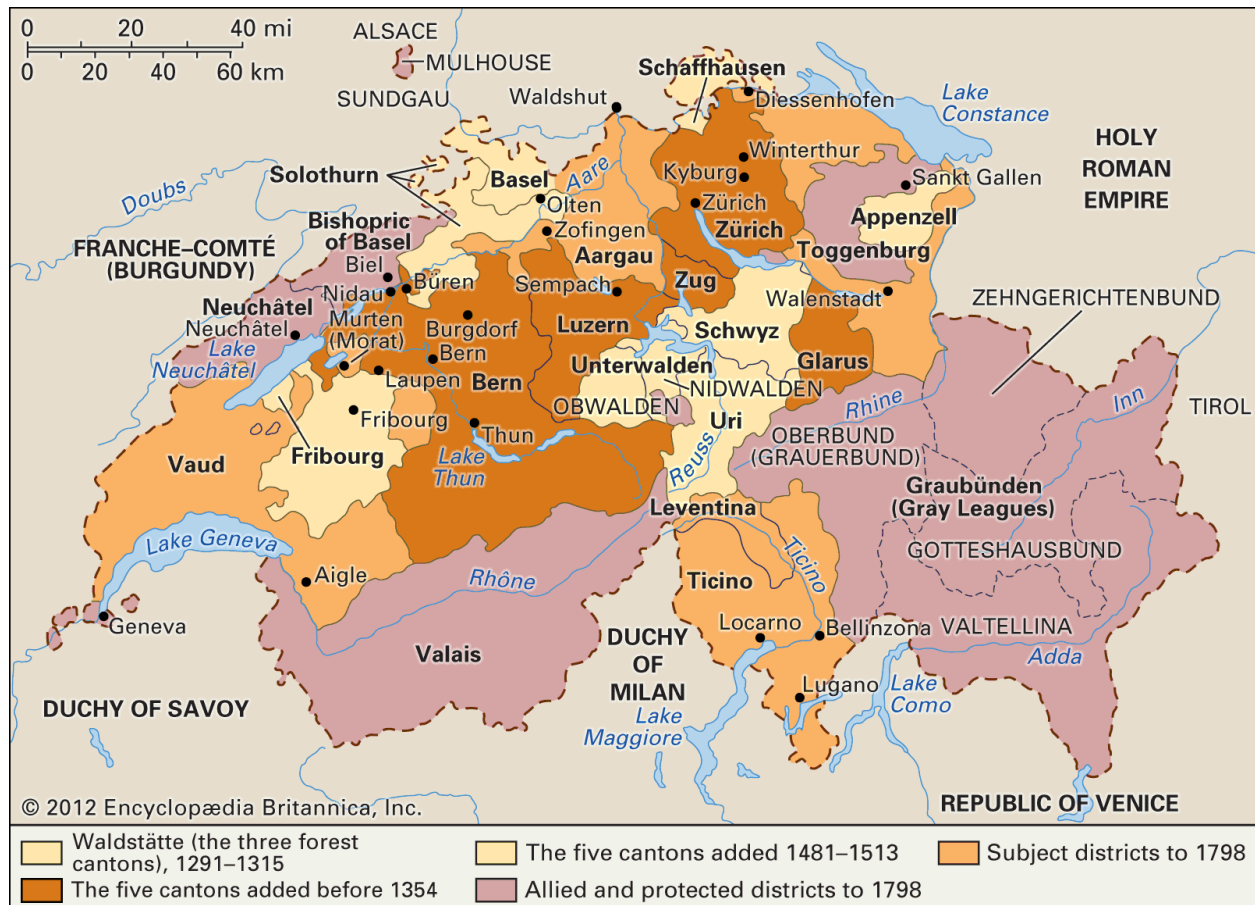
[Eleanor Young Obituary - Halifax, NS](#)

With my permission, Janice Landry wrote about Eleanor in a postscript to a completed book, published after Eleanor's death: *Every Little Thing, How Small Acts of Kindness Make a Big Impact* (Pottersfield Press, 2025).

Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541: A Drive for Structure, Discipline and Certainty

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For ST 2178/CH 2178 History and Theology of the European Reformations (April 2023)



Introduction

John Calvin (1509-64) returned to Geneva in September 1541, and by January of 1542 the Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances were ratified “as the fundamental church law of the republic of Geneva.”¹ This document was produced with such alacrity that one might have wondered whether Calvin had travelled from Strasbourg with it in his trunks. This paper will explore some of the political and personal circumstances that led to the Ordinances being crafted as they were. The political upheaval experienced by Geneva, the personal upheaval experienced by John Calvin and the influences of Guillaume Farel and Martin Bucer will be discussed.

This paper posits that the Ecclesiastical Ordinances were both Calvin and Geneva’s attempts to impose order upon disorder. The concise foray into church organization, administration and discipline was sufficiently on point, that the structure, discipline and certainty that was its original aim can be seen within ecclesiastical contexts to this day.

Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances

The Catholic Church occupied much more than a place of worship in the lives of the people; over 1500 years it had become arguably the single most important structure governing civil society. Its vast bureaucracy ensured orderliness in such matters as land ownership, education, census-like records including marriage and baptismal certificates and the management of wills and estates. Naturally, the Church’s administration included internal management of its own offices, clerics, land holdings and its political/military efforts.²

Following Martin Luther’s publication and defence of his 95 *Theses* in 1517, reformist ideas spread remarkably quickly throughout Europe. Ideas became practical

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. VII: Modern Christianity: The Swiss Reformation* (<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc8/hcc8>), para. 104.

² Robert Fennell, “Module 1.5” History and Theology of the European Reformations ST 2178/CH 2178 (class lecture, Atlantic School of Theology, January 2023).

changes within churches and communities; reformers' conflict with the Catholic church led to separation from and renunciation of the papacy. The anticlerical movement decried the inability and unwillingness of the papacy to govern its own priests. This begged the question of the kind of reformed institution would take its place. The new church would need to address the issues of how it would be structured and how that structure would be maintained.

The Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541 set out such a structure. John Calvin describes the four offices of the church with such precision and clarity that "its essential features have passed into the constitution and discipline of most of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches of Europe and America."³ The four categories of ministers were Pastors who preach the Word of God, Doctors who study and teach the Word, Elders who oversee the discipline of the community and Deacons who oversee charitable matters.⁴ The Ordinances also retained "the most controversial single institution established by the Reformation,"⁵ the Consistory. The Consistory was an ecclesiastical court, charged with the enforcement of the church's teachings upon the community.

Calvin's introduction to the Ordinances sets out that their purpose is to preserve the doctrine of the holy gospel, to protect the church, to educate the youth and to provide for the poor. Importantly, he notes "all of which cannot be done without a definite order and rule of life, from which every estate may learn the duty of its office."⁶

A reading of the Ordinances is refreshing. Unlike much theological writing of the time, the document is clear, brief and specific. The roles and expectations of church offices are described and the parameters and boundaries between church and state outlined. Everything that is required is there and not more. This approach could be commended to governance and by law drafters of today.

³ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VII, para. 104

⁴ Robert M. Kingdon, "Was the Protestant Reformation a Revolution? The Case of Geneva," in *Transition and Revolution: Problems and Issues of European Renaissance and Reformation History*, ed. Robert M. Kingdon (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1974), 70-1.

⁵ Kingdon, "Was the Protestant Reformation a Revolution?" 72.

⁶ John Calvin, "Ecclesiastical Ordinances, 1541" in Bergier, J.F. and Kingdon, R.M. *Registres de la Compagnie de Geneve au temps se Calvin*. Translated by G.R. and Greengrass, M. Potter. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), 71-6.

Calvin had already given some consideration to the question of church organization and discipline. In his first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*⁷ this topic was alluded to in the last of six chapters under the heading of “Christian Liberty, the power of the church and of the political magistrate.” The issue was more fully explored in a separate chapter (“the Power of the Church”) in the 1529 second edition of the *Institutes*.⁸ The specific version of the 1541 Ecclesiastical Ordinances was adopted so quickly and with so little revision by the Genevan Council due to a need for structure, discipline and certainty at that point in history for both the City of Geneva and the man John Calvin.

Upheaval in Geneva

Until 1534 Geneva was ruled by a Prince-Bishop who owed allegiance to the Duke of Savoy and the Emperor. Economic decline in the late medieval period had Genevans questioning their ties to Savoy and France and contemplating greater connection to other Swiss cities such as Fribourg and Berne. This coincided with anti-clerical sentiments and the rise of reform ideals. Although independent-minded, the Genevans had to be geographically strategic given the location of the city at the southern edge of the Swiss Confederacy, adjacent to a long body of water: the Savoyards had a strong military advantage. This military advantage was demonstrated in 1519 when the Duke of Savoy entered the city and demanded veto over Syndical elections and forbade alliances with the Swiss. Although superficially successful, the Duke did not quell strong nationalist sentiment, and the stage was set for a series of complex political manoeuvres over the next two decades as various factions attempted to set a course for an independent Geneva. The city of Berne, which had embraced the Reformation, emerged as Geneva’s closest ally. Thus, the political goal of independence became entwined with questions of religious

⁷ John Calvin, *Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta* (Kaiser, 1926-1936)

⁸ Wilhelm Pauck, "Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion," *Church History*, March 1946, 19-21.

reform. Over time, factions within the city repeatedly rose united in response to crisis, then splintered over other issues when the crisis had passed.⁹

In October of 1534 the Bishop was deposed by vote of the Petit Conseil of Geneva and by August of 1535 the Mass was suspended. The following year, the citizens of Geneva voted in favour of the Reformation. This both created greater ties to Berne (from a religious perspective) and greater caution (from a political perspective) within a city that did not want to trade the yoke of Savoy for a Bernese model. Historic conflict with Berne over certain territories and their revenues added an economic complication. “It was essential that the city find a balance which would preserve Geneva’s freedoms and the alliance while avoiding Bernese ambitions; maintaining this political *via media* was not only to prove difficult but also extremely divisive.”¹⁰ It is important to recall that factionalism and personal animosity meant more than merely losing at the polls; charges could lead to such punishments as banishment, torture and execution.

John Calvin’s initial sojourn in Geneva between 1536 and 1538 occurred in the midst of this political chaos which coincided with an increased interest on the part of Berne in the new religious structures in Geneva. The established church in Berne sought to see itself replicated in Geneva, a position that grated on the citizenry. A Confession of Faith proposed by Calvin and Guillaume Farel in 1538 alienated different groups for difference reasons but created sufficient concern for unrest that the Petit Conseil suppressed discussion in advance of its vote in February of that year.¹¹ Two months later, Calvin was banished from the city.

Upheaval in the Life of John Calvin

Born in France in 1509, it was 1536 when John Calvin arrived in Geneva for the first time at the age of 27. His life’s journey had already taken a significant number of

⁹ William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 13-19.

¹⁰ Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 25.

¹¹ Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 28.

unexpected twists and turns. His early life and the theological education mandated by his father required him to leave home before the age of ten to live first with a noble family and then to attend the University of Paris around age twelve. His father then determined that a law degree was the preferred course and between 1528 and 1532 Calvin studied in Bourges and Orleans. It has been suggested that the early death of his mother and his removal from his father's home may have created "a sense of homelessness that would be later deepened by exile."¹² Certainly this sense would only have intensified as a result of moving between cities and modes of study. On his return to Paris to study humanism in 1532, Calvin was an orphan as well.¹³ Calvin's time in Paris was short-lived, as his writings and reputation as a reformer caught the attention of the king. A controversial sermon understood to have been co-authored by Calvin, although delivered by Nicholas Cop in the autumn of 1533 led to him flee Paris.¹⁴ He had stays in Saintonge and Nerac followed by a return to Paris, which continued to remain unsafe due to arrest and execution of reformers. Calvin was forced to leave Paris again in 1535. His travels took him to Basle by way of Strasbourg where the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was published.¹⁵ He made only one last trip to his homeland in 1536 to settle family affairs and, together with two siblings, Calvin set out for Strasbourg intending to settle into a life of scholarship.

Due to troop movements, the party was required to detour to Geneva, an event considered by later reformers to have been "brought thither by Providence."¹⁶ Calvin must have hoped that he had finally found a home in Geneva; Guillaume Farel an established and persuasive preacher exhorted him to remain there in service to the reformation. It was not to be, however, and by 1538 both Farel and Calvin were exiled by the Genevan Council after refusing to administer communion on Easter Sunday. Given three days to leave, Calvin finally concluded his journey to Strasbourg, two years later than intended.¹⁷

¹² William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11.

¹³ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 236.

¹⁴ Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 238.

¹⁵ Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Westminster Press, 1909), 11-14.

¹⁶ Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, 16.

¹⁷ Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 242.

Thus, we see that before the age of thirty, John Calvin had resided in multiple cities, pursued different vocations, had to depart Paris twice under dangerous circumstances and had been formally exiled from Geneva. This is a remarkably chaotic existence for someone who described himself: “Being of a rather unsociable and shy disposition, I have always loved retirement and peace.”¹⁸ One would surmise that Calvin’s three years in Strasbourg, the longest he had remained in one location in many years, were a time of contentment and stability. The period was one of refinement of his theology, with the creation of the second edition of the *Institutes* and attendances at colloquies at Haguenau, Worms and Regensburg. His domestic life was enriched by marriage and family. His decision to depart such a settled life in 1541 could have come only as a result of compelling influence and with some assurance of certainty.

Influences of Guillaume Farel and Martin Bucer

Before considering the influences that presented in 1541, it is apt to reflect upon the personal impacts of two men who played similar roles of mentor, colleague, friend and advisor to John Calvin between the years 1536 and 1541: Guillaume Farel and Martin Bucer.

Guillaume Farel (1489-1565) was a fellow Frenchman and the senior minister in Geneva in 1536. Known as a fiery preacher, Farel had been working to bring the reformation to cities in Switzerland, after fleeing Paris amidst the persecution of Protestants. Farel’s “vigorous preaching style” reflected his deep commitment to reform and his impatience with the pace of its implementation.¹⁹ Calvin was on the receiving end of this confrontational style when he detoured to Geneva in 1536 and was exhorted by Farel to stay. “Farel kept me at Geneva not so much by advice and entreaty as by a dreadful adjuration...”²⁰ That Farel was immediately prepared to treat the young Calvin as a

¹⁸ B.A. Gerrish, *Reformers in Profile: Advocates of Reform 1300-1600* (Fortress Press, 1967), 151.

¹⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Guillaume-Farel>

²⁰ John Calvin, cited in Williston Walker, *John Calvin: The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism (1509-1564)* (Schocken, 1969), 158.

colleague is demonstrated by the fact that they began to work together to draft a Confession of Faith for the Genevan Council to not only approve, but enforce.²¹ Despite Farel's "excessive vehemence"²², their association lasted almost thirty years thereafter and involved dozens of items of correspondence. Calvin, in the last weeks of his life, requested that their "seamless partnership" be remembered by Farel after Calvin's death.²³ Their association has been described as "the brains trust of a rapidly spreading underground movement" and those two years when they worked together so closely in Geneva were foundational to Calvin's theology and evolving thought on church structure and discipline.²⁴ Farel and Calvin were expelled from Geneva together in 1538 but parted company: Farel to Neuchatel and Calvin at last to Strasbourg, a city more matured in its reformation.

Martin Bucer, a longtime resident and leader of the church in Strasbourg, has been described as a "lesser prophet of the Reformation."²⁵ Calvin himself praised Bucer's skills: "...in addition to his recondite learning and enlarged knowledge of things, and to the clearness of his mind...he is hardly surpassed by any at this day, equaled by few and excelled by still fewer...that no one in our age has been with so much labour engaged in the work of expounding Scripture."²⁶

The 1520s and early 1530s in Strasbourg had been times of internal upheaval generated by movements "variously called the 'Radical Reformers, the 'left wing of the Reformation, or simply 'Anabaptists' or 'Baptizers'..."²⁷ Martin Bucer had been part of various discussions that explored the roles of the church, its administration and the authority of the civil government as Strasbourg extracted itself from the papacy while

²¹ Daniel Doriani, "Friends and Mentors in the Reformation: Calvin, Farel and Bucer," *Presbyterion* (Fall 2017): 18.

²² Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 19.

²³ John Calvin, letter to Farel, cited in Heiko Oberman, "Calvin and Farel: The Dynamics of Legitimation in Early Calvinism," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* (June 1999): 7.

²⁴ Oberman, "Calvin and Farel," 9.

²⁵ Hastings Eells, "The Contributions of Martin Bucer to the Reformation," *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (January 1931), 29.

²⁶ John Calvin, dedication to Grynaeus, *Commentary on Romans*, https://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol38/htm/iii.htm

²⁷ James Kittelson, "Martin Bucer and the ministry of the church," in *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community*, ed. D.F. Wright (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 84.

seeking not to go so far as Munster, where radical ideas and conflict led to bloodshed.²⁸ John Calvin was taken under the wing of Bucer in Strasbourg at a time when the church ministers were seeking to decentralize the disciplinary powers over both clergy and parishioners away from the state. A 'Constitution' had been proclaimed in 1529, followed by the creation of twenty-one church wardens in 1531.²⁹ Thus Calvin was exposed to a church structure that had learned to function (even if imperfectly) for almost ten years.

Calvin's thinking and writing on these topics were further impacted by Bucer including him in the colloquies of Hagenau, Worms, and Regensburg. These Protestant-Catholic explorations aimed at staving off a formal division of Christendom exposed Calvin to the leading theologians in a climate of debate.³⁰ After working in Strasbourg only a year, Calvin published the second edition of his *Institutes* with a more developed chapter on the power of the church.

Martin Bucer's impact on Calvin may also have been one of temperament. Whereas Farel had been confrontational, Bucer was known in theological circles as a mediator, having been invited to create consensus both among reformers and between the Protestant and Catholic theologians. Not only did Calvin's ideas about church structure solidify under Bucer's tutelage but also the approach of compromise and conciliation.

Political and Personal Intersections

Geneva's need for structure reached an apex in 1540: the expulsion of Farel and Calvin had not brought about the desired stability but rather further factionalism. In this environment of uncertainty, the Catholic church saw an opportunity to re-install the old faith, as there were Genevans who remained committed to Catholicism. Cardinal Sadoleto, a respected and persuasive Catholic theologian wrote a lengthy letter to the Petit Conseil, seeking to bring Geneva back to the old faith. Beza described this as an entreaty

²⁸ Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 242.

²⁹ Jean Rott, "The Strasbourg Kirchenpfleger and Parish Discipline: Theory and Practice," in *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community*, ed. D.F. Wright (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122.

³⁰ Doriani, "Friends and Mentors in the Reformation," 23.

“back into the lap of the Romish Harlot.”³¹ The anti-Calvin magistrates having been removed from government, the Council appealed to Calvin first to respond to Sadoletto, which he eloquently did, and then to return to lead the church in Geneva.

So great was Calvin’s distaste for the prospect of a return that he stated in a letter to Farel that he would rather “submit to death a hundred times than to that cross.”³² Beza notes Calvin’s “aversion to disturbances” was only overcome when Martin Bucer invoked the example of Jonah and warned of “Divine judgment” if Calvin did not return to Geneva.³³ Calvin’s agreement to return took many variables into account, not the least of which was the loss of his hard-won stability in Strasbourg. Calvin was able to assess his own bargaining power against the degree of chaos reigning in Geneva, if only because of the generous offer made by the magistrates.³⁴ Desirous of creating a church-led order for the church, Calvin made it a condition of his return that such a constitution be created. “The church cannot stand firm unless a government is constituted as prescribed to us by the Word of God and observed in the early church.”³⁵ It could be argued that Calvin gave up his own life of structure and certainty so that he could create the same for the Genevan church.

For the Genevan Councils, the previous two years of political upheaval was of sufficient deterrent that the ceding of some decision-making power to the church was an investment in a more stable civic arena. The Council immediately agreed to Calvin’s condition and struck a committee to draft the document that would “regulate the Church and religious aspects of Genevan society, including the establishment of a Consistory.”³⁶ Led by Calvin and populated by men who had previously been loyal to Farel, the committee produced the Ecclesiastical Ordinances. They were notable not only for the speed with

³¹ Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, 25.

³² Calvin, letter to Farel, March 25, 1540, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45423/45423-h/45423-h.htm#Page_175.

³³ Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, 28.

³⁴ Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 247.

³⁵ Calvin, letter to Farel, September 16, 1541, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45423/45423-h/45423-h.htm#Page_175.

³⁶ Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 53.

which they were written but also for the extent to which they were adopted with minimal revision on January 2, 1541.

The timing was right for Calvin to trade the stability and success of his years in Strasbourg for leverage: he was able to insist upon the creation of a church organization that set out boundaries of roles and responsibilities, and created consequences of non-compliance that could be enforced by the church. Naphy queries whether politics was the major factor in the Genevan reformation: "...Geneva was a volatile city, with an unsettled constitution, full of tensions and competing social, political and economic forces, surrounded by dangerous, avaricious states."³⁷ However, if politics tilled the ground, it was Calvin who tended the crop year after year, at the expense of his own health, until the roots of the church had become the very foundation of Genevan society.

Conclusion

By 1541 both the City of Geneva and its most famous theologian, John Calvin, sought the creation of stability following years of turmoil and the desire to bring certainty to the reformed church and its place within civil society. The political and personal context aligned to bring about the Ecclesiastical Ordinances which provided the structure, discipline and certainty that was desired by the city and by Calvin, albeit for differing reasons. Calvin's role as pastor of Geneva was notably lengthy, as was his ability to withstand political crises and barely veiled contempt from citizens.³⁸ "This ecclesiastical structure was an outstanding success in consolidating the Reformation in Geneva. Much of it persists in that city down to the present. It helped win for the city the international reputation as a center of Reformed Protestantism which has accounted for much of Geneva's distinctive character over the centuries."³⁹

The second generation of reform was underway, and the eye-opening newness of its theology needed to turn to the practicalities of institutional longevity if it was to succeed.

³⁷ Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 43.

³⁸ Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 251.

³⁹ Kingdon, "Was the Protestant Reformation a Revolution?" 73.

Political and theological factionalism meant chaos: the Geneva Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541 provided the structure, discipline and certainty for the city that was later to be called “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in this earth since the days of the Apostles.”⁴⁰ John Calvin could not have asked for more.

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⁴⁰ John Knox to Anna Locke, quoted in Lindberg, 234.

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