



Opioid Crisis Service of Lament
Thursday April 14, 2022
Reflection by the Rt. Reverend John R. Stephens

According to the Coroner's Report for British Columbia, in 2021 just last year,... 2021 was the deadliest year on record for illicit drug overdoses in British Columbia.

Here are some of the facts as presented there:

- 2,224 suspected illicit drug toxicity deaths occurred between January and December 2021.
- This represents a 26% increase over the number of deaths in 2020.
- This equates to about 6.1 deaths per day.
- 71% of those dying were aged 30 to 59, and 78% were male.
- No deaths have been reported at supervised consumption or drug overdose prevention sites.
- There is no indication that prescribed safe supply is contributing to illicit drug deaths.
- Most people have died in a private residence (56%) or some other form of residence, which includes shelters, SROs, hotels, motels, rooming houses, etc. 15% of those deaths occurred in vehicles or outside.
- Illicit fentanyl (and analogues) was involved in the illicit drug toxicity deaths approximately 83% of the time.

On this date, April 14, 2016, the provincial health officer of the day, Dr. Perry Kendall declared a public health emergency in relation to the opioid-related overdose deaths. In 2016 the rate of overdose deaths per 100,000 people was 20.4. That rate in 2021 was 43 deaths per 100,000 people.

2,224 deaths last year, more than six people dying every day. Every day.

These are the statistics and perhaps if we simply keep them as statistics we can try to ignore them or avoid them or not make any real eye contact with them. But these are real people. People who are our neighbours.

They are brothers, sisters, parents, children. They are uncles, aunties, teachers, lawyers, friends. They are people who work in grocery stores, coffee shops, offices, universities. They are people who know the streets, walk the streets, drive the streets, or have a fancy home on a street. They are like me, they are like you, they are like those people in our lives whom we love and cherish and appreciate. They are all of this and of so much more.

But they are real people. Real people with dreams and aspirations and hopes and fears. Real people who laughed and cried and wondered how this world could be a better, kinder, gentler place. Real people who sadly probably died on their own even though there are many others who could have tried to help them. They are individuals just like us gathered here today to mourn them and mourn what continues to take place. They are not just statistics.

Today in the Christian Church is known as Maundy Thursday. A day where, amongst several other things, we focus on an image of Jesus Christ that is hard for us to forget because it gets etched in our minds and our memories. We remember a scene where Jesus took a towel and a basin of water and washed the feet of his followers. He washed off the dust and dirt and grime of the world. The ugliness, hatred, rejection, judgment, insecurities, and many other things that plague all of us... all of this was washed off. Jesus washed their feet and then he called them to do the same. To do the same.

And so, in churches across the country and around the world we will be doing this. Washing the feet of others not out of guilty duty but because of what it is that we believe about God and how we are to treat one another. To become servants, to become people who are compassionate, to become ones who see the image of God in all people. This is the challenge of this day but really all days for all of us who have faith in a God of compassion and love and hope for this world.

And we are called to live this out each and every day. This sign that we see other human beings in a different way: not as expendable or unimportant or just a statistic but as a human being made in the likeness of God.

And so, for all of us who come here today whether we have some faith in God or none, whether we seek a higher calling or just want to do the right thing, we are here to honour all those who have died in our province because of tainted drugs. To exclaim with determination and expectation that this is not good enough and never will be. That something needs to change so that we might respect the dignity of every human and that no life lost to this horrible scourge of drug overdoses can ever be seen as acceptable.

We gather here for a vigil to proclaim that our province must do better, that we must live with a compassion and hope for all human life. For those of us with faith, to see that God is calling us to be servants to others, to all others in whom we see and know the image of God.

We need things to change and to change quickly with an outpouring of love that wins out over a hesitation to know what to do.