

Reasons for Hope in the Church

It's not news to anyone that the church is in trouble. Here's a report from the *Anglican Journal* this summer. It's headed, "Church attendance dropped faster during the pandemic, but parishes adapting: statistician."

Data for 2021 confirm attendance in the Anglican Church of Canada declined by about 10 per cent that year, after a similar drop in 2020, the church's statistics officer says, while preliminary findings from 2022 suggest it continued in a steep decline into the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2019, statistics officer Canon Neil Elliot released a **report** that described a downward trend of 2.5 per cent per year—a rate that would see the church's membership depleted entirely by 2040 if it continued. An update with data from 2020 showed the downward trend had accelerated to about 10 per cent that year, with data that was preliminary at the time suggesting a similar rate of decline for 2021. The latest numbers confirm the latter, Elliot says.

Humanly speaking, things do not look good. But there is a phrase that occurs in the Bible on a number of significant occasions. It's the simple phrase, "but God." But God. There is a time, for instance, when the people of Israel have been in exile in Babylon for 70 years. They have settled down and made themselves at home. Sometimes they tell stories about Jerusalem, and how wonderful it used to be. But that was long ago in their grandparents' time. Then there comes a message from the prophet Isaiah, saying the most surprising thing: they are free to go back to Jerusalem. They have been in exile for a long time, "but God" . . .

*Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.*

***I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?**
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

Isaiah 43:16-21

In particular I want us to notice those two sentences in the middle. “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I'm about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” God is always doing something new. That is God's nature. A new covenant, a new commandment, a new creation, a new community. Why is God always doing new things? I suspect this is partly because God is by nature a Creator. But it is also because God is not satisfied with the mess the world is in, and God continues to do new things little by little, working through people who make themselves available, until that day when the new Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth and all things are made new.

So I believe in our present situation, our present culture, our present decline, God is still at work. Our task, according to Isaiah, is not to dwell on the past, not to wish things were the way they were 20, 30, 40 years ago. Our job is spiritual discernment. Isaiah asks, “Do you not perceive it?” Meaning, can you not discern where God is at work, even if it doesn't look like the past?

Let me offer you what I think are seven signs of hope—hope for the church because God is at work doing something new. We'll start at #7 and count down!¹

7. People are interested in spirituality

You may remember the name of Canadian author Douglas Coupland. A few years ago, right at the end of his book, *Life after God*, he wrote this:

Now here is my secret. I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God — that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of

¹ Omitting: New initiatives in the C of E. HTB and FX. St Mellitus.

kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

Douglas Coupland, *Life after God* (1994)

Now, you may have noticed that that quotation is from 1994, which is almost 30 years ago! Is that time over? But the number of people like Coupland, who are spiritual but not religious continues. Indeed, there's now an acronym for those who are spiritual but not religious: SBNR!

Here is an article from 2021, headed, "More Americans now say they are spiritual not religious." (It says Americans but I'm pretty sure that Canada is more or less the same,) And the graph on the right shows the numbers of spiritual but not religious going up between 2012 and 2017 from 19% to 27% while in the same period the number of those who are religious *and* spiritual, which I suspect is most of us, has gone down by about the same proportion, 59% to 48%.

Some Christians are puzzled by this phenomenon and others are frustrated by it. But my question is, could this be a sign of hope in our world? Clearly people who say they are SBNR are not simply going to show up on a Sunday morning for Eucharist! It's a long journey from one to the other. The question we should be asking is, what is the first step?

Some Christians in England are using what is called the Jesus Deck. This is a beautifully produced pack of 52 cards, with four suits, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the cards cover all the major events and teachings of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Christians will set up a booth at a new age festival, or some other local event, and offer prayer using the Jesus Deck. They always make it clear that this is not fortune-telling or predicting the future and quite different from tarot cards. This is simply connecting something in the life of Jesus with something in the life of the other person. It's very simple and very profound, but for many who are spiritual but not religious it can be that first step on the journey that will lead them to Christian faith. (If you Google the Jesus Deck, you will find a lot of references to it on a number of diocesan websites in England, which shows you how widely it's being used.)

I think it's sign of hope. Here's the second:

6. Young Christians are being attracted to Anglicanism

We have been amazed at a growing interest in Anglicanism among young people from other traditions. For instance, in Hamilton, an Anglican church, St Luke's, had been empty for, I think, seven years was reopened a couple of years ago for a group of young people who wanted to pray morning and evening prayer together—from the BCP! These days you will find 20 and more young people meeting for morning prayer, several days a week, at 6:30 in the morning. And yes, I did say 6:30 in the morning. The leader, Rob Miller, grew up Roman Catholic, spent some years in evangelical churches, and then was ordained an Anglican priest about a month ago. So there's one example.

What is also interesting is that other churches have now started this tradition of early morning prayer—not Anglicans, which is interesting, but a Baptist Church and a Presbyterian Church. Go figure!

I can't help noticing also that in our own little church in Hamilton, we have a number of young families from evangelical backgrounds, who don't want to give up on Jesus and the Bible that have shaped them, but they're looking for a greater sense of tradition, and in some cases a more liberal attitude to social issues.²

is it possible God is doing a new thing?³

5. Increased church planting

² I heard recently that the Archbishop of York, second most senior priest in the Anglican communion, when he was Bishop of Chelmsford, ordained several pastors from different denominations who wanted to become Anglicans. And I have heard rumors that similar things may happen in Canada.

³ Here's another example. I must confess that I haven't used the Book of Common Prayer for some years, but in recent years I have prayed the General Confession from the BCP, which many of you will remember, not once but twice. Neither time was it in an Anglican church, however: once was in a Christian Reformed Church, the other was in an Associated Gospel Church.

Ten days from now, around 250 church planters from across Canada, from many denominations and many ethnicities, will be converging on Calgary. This is for a conference sponsored by an organisation called Church Planting Canada. It's an umbrella organization which includes 25 different smaller organizations, all of them involved in church planting. One of these people actually told me, our denomination would probably have died out a few years ago if we hadn't been planting new churches.

You may say, that's all very well, but how many of them will be Anglicans? I'm afraid the answer is, probably not very many. But that attitude is changing. I have taught a course about church planting at Wycliffe College for at least a dozen years, and there have been between 6 and 20 students in the class each year. That's over 100 students! Three times that I know of, a student has emerged from the class who has gone on to start a new Christian community. (Just ten days ago, I told the Professor of Theology at Wycliffe that, and he replied, "Wow, I've been teaching theology for years, and never yet have I had a student from any of those classes go on to formulate a new doctrine!")⁴

Then one of those students—Daniel Joseph—asked me if we could get together Anglican church planters from across Canada. I'm afraid my first reaction was, I'm sure we can find an old phone box somewhere to squeeze them into. But then I began to make a list, and was surprised at how long it got. So I contacted those people and said, Would you or anyone you know be interested in linking up with other Anglicans doing out-of-the-box new things?

As a result, I now have a mailing list of 25 people across the country! We met online back in June, and spent a couple of hours simply introducing ourselves

⁴ Of course, church planting is so much controversial. People will say, why start new churches when we should be filling up the old ones. But of course it's not as simple as that. Every church has its particular culture, and for someone with no church backgrounds, it can be very awkward and embarrassing trying to enter into that way of doing things. And as the number of Canadians with no church background at all increases day by day the possibility that they are simply going to wake up one Sunday and decide to come to a choral Eucharist at Saint Swithin's in the swamp is, let us say unlikely. But new churches are different: often they are designed to accommodate new people who don't understand the face at all and certainly don't understand traditional liturgy. And those churches are still young and flexible and not as set in their ways some of us.

and what we were involved in and then praying for each other. One has started an abbey and brewery on Vancouver Island. Another is chaplain to bikers in Ontario. It was a wonderful beginning. Often such people feel isolated, more traditional colleagues can be suspicious of what they're doing, and they wonder if any other Anglicans understand what they're doing.

We're meeting again, online of course, in November, and this time we're going to hear from Ian Mobsby, the new community missionary in the Diocese of Niagara, about what we can learn about church planting from the Church of England.

4. Ecumenical cooperation⁵

Shortly after our Bishop, Susan Bell, was elected Bishop of Niagara, she asked me if I could bring together some of what she called the open evangelicals in Hamilton, so that she could meet them. For various reasons, I have a lot of connections across denominations so this wasn't difficult. So one morning about 15 of them crowded into my front room, and one by one we shared our spiritual stories and described the ministries that we were involved in. There was a lot of humor and good-natured teasing. (One Baptist pastor, an English woman who started a church in a restaurant, said, "I wish my mother was alive: she'd be so pleased to know I was having tea with the bishop!") And at the end, they said to Bishop Susan "Susan, put your chair in the middle and we will gather round, lay hands on you, and pray for you." Which they did. It was a beautiful moment.

Since then, Bishop Susan has stayed in touch with these people. She invited the same group for lunch together six months later, and she asked them, "Where do I find young leaders like you?" Because most of them are young, at least by our standards, as well as very passionate about their faith, culturally savvy, and willing to try new things. It was a lively conversation, though I'm not sure the bishop really got an answer to her question!

⁵ Also: Luke's paper about how cooperation stimulates mission. True city stories

Later, there was an event organized at the cathedral in Hamilton about what are called “the nones and the dones”—those who have no religion, and those who are done with religion. I said to a friend, How come this event (which was run by evangelical churches) is taking place in the cathedral? Oh, he replied, Pastor Kevin from the Baptist Church picked up the phone, called the Bishop, and said, may we have this event in the cathedral? And the Bishop said, of course! You’re very welcome!

So . . . I see Anglicans being humble enough to learn from evangelicals, and evangelicals being very appreciative of Anglicans. I think it rejoices Jesus’s heart—and it’s a new thing.

3. A willingness to take risks and try new things

I often think we misinterpret the parable of the talents, as if it is merely saying, Do the things that you're good at. So, if you’re a builder, join the building committee; if you’re an accountant, be the treasurer. You know how it works.

But that's a pretty bland message when you think about it, unlike the sort of thing Jesus usually says. But my whole attitude to this parable changed when a friend pointed out that the two servants who invested their talents took a huge risk. That’s the nature of investment, right? And the higher the return on your investment, the greater the risk is likely to be. And these guys got a very high rate of return on their investment. So they could have lost everything! They took a huge risk. The third servant was not so much irresponsible as playing safe, unwilling to take a risk.

I think that understanding of the parable has shaped my spiritual life over the years in quite significant ways. And in our present cultural circumstances, it's particularly important that we learn to take risks and not play things safe. Part of that is getting out from the comfort of our church buildings and meeting people where they are. That’s what the Jesus Deck is all about, of course!

Another example that I'm familiar with concerns a young woman who was hired by the Diocese of Niagara 18 months ago as a community missionary. If you ask Susie what she does, she will tell you she spends a lot of time in coffee shops, bars, and other social settings. She gets to know people, she chats to them, she makes connections, and as appropriate she will talk about faith. Out of this has come a knitting group of young women that Susie brought together and that meets every week. She is presently thinking about setting up a meditation group in the church to which she is attached, and inviting some of her SBNR friends who are interested in spiritual practices like meditation.

If that seems a bit over-the-top to you, and you say, "I could never do anything like that," then consider Margaret's story, which is also to do with knitting! I heard this at her Christian Reformed Church, and was so touched that I asked Margaret to write it down, and got her permission to read it. This is what she said:

Our church building had been renovated and the neighborhood had noticed, because of all the external work that was done. After having to worship elsewhere for several months it was exciting to move back into our own building. But I couldn't help wonder: "And now what? Are we just going to use this building for ourselves? What about the neighborhood? How can we open up to this community?"

I am well aware of my own limitations, but I know that I am a good knitter and you can only offer what you're good at. So after praying about it for a while I asked council if it would give me permission to use the church building for a knitting group in the community.

There would be no budget, since we don't cost anything, so there would be no hurdle there. I would make a cup of tea and bring baking, that's all. Council gave me permission, one of our members helped me make some posters and I went around the neighborhood to ask if I could publicize our venture.

I went to see a couple of apartment building superintendents, the library, Starbucks, and someone gave me the editors' address of the neighbourhood associations. They were willing to publish our invitation and we started. I had decided that if even only one person came, I would go ahead with it.

My phone number was on the posters, so I got a few calls. And people came! It's not like we got an avalanche of participants, but we had five or six right away and they live in the neighborhood, a couple are members of our own church, most are not.

One lady joined because she was off work because of epilepsy. She had been in Hamilton for 5 years and didn't really have anyone to connect with. She knits beautifully and she came because of the notice in the library. Our church is situated in a neighborhood with more than your average number of people with mental illness, and some are members of our group.

One thing is key: before our meetings start I just ask the Lord to bless this effort. To be there with us, and to show us what to do from here on in. I love our group, and I trust Him for the rest.

You may not be a Susie, but maybe you are a Margaret. People like Susie and Margaret give me hope. God is doing a new thing.

2. New movements of prayer

I suspect new spiritual life is always connected to people praying, so when I see a new interest in prayer, I am encouraged. I already mentioned to you the prayer communities that are springing up around Hamilton. But there is also an international prayer movement called 24/7 that encourages prayer groups around the world. These are often more evangelical or charismatic than some Anglicans feel comfortable with, though it just may be one of those times when we need to take a risk and make ourselves vulnerable, and check it out.

In Hamilton, the local chapter of 24/7 is called GOHOP, the Greater Ontario House of Prayer—a name that is reflective of the sense of humour of the first director. (She once told me her job was to “make friends and pray.”) They offer conferences on prayer, a very imaginative prayer room that people can visit during Lent, and a prayer internship, where young people learn about different forms of prayer over the course of a year. I actually discovered there is a chapter of the 24/7 movement here in Calgary, and they have a big event coming up next week. Some of you may already be aware of it.

Again, if we want to know about new Anglican expressions of prayer, there is a very interesting project at Lambeth Palace in London, the home of the Archbishop of Canterbury, called the Saint Anselm's community. A dozen or so young people of all denominations live together, work in the community, and pray together for a year. That too is a new thing—a God-thing.

OK, so there my first six reasons for hope in the church: 7, people interested in spirituality in our culture; 6, an interest in Anglicanism among young Christians; 5, an interest in church planting in all denominations; 4, ecumenical cooperation; 3, a willingness to take risks and try new things; and 2, new movements of prayer.

OK, and finally we come to the number one reason for hope in the church-- drumroll, please! I think our Primate, Linda Nicholls, nailed it in an article in the *Anglican Journal* where she responds to those depressing statistics. She says,

I think it's a wake-up call. If people are not finding a place of hope and good news, then we have to ask, How are we presenting that hope and good news to this current generation and time?

She connects hope and good news! To me, that is the best source of hope, the Good News, the Gospel. What is that good news? Sadly, I find many Anglicans who cannot answer that simple question. One elderly gentleman said to me, "I've been in church all of my life, and I can't say I have ever heard anything that I would call the gospel."⁶ I don't know if that answer is more or less sad than the woman who said, "What's the gospel? That's easy. Love your neighbor as yourself." To which I couldn't resist replying, "I'm sorry but that's really not good news, either for me or for my neighbor. I can be friendly to them, kind and helpful even: but love them as myself? I really can't live up to that standard."

No, Jesus was perfectly clear about what the good news was. In Mark chapter one, When he began his ministry, says Mark, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming

⁶ To which my rather unkind answer is, "Then you should sue every priest you've ever had and the seminaries that trained them, for professional incompetence and malpractice!"

the good news of God, and saying: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

So what is the good news Jesus brings? It's the good news is that God is ushering in his Kingdom through this man Jesus who (though we don't know it yet) is actually king of this kingdom!. And that word Kingdom is simply shorthand for God restoring all things, putting an end to all that is evil in our world, and making it new.

I remember asking one group of church leaders, What is the gospel? The first and shortest answer I got was from a young church planter, who responded straight way, “God is changing everything, and you can be a part of it.” I thought that was brilliant. Of course, he was a church planter and if you are a church planter you'd better know what the good news is. A member of a new church here in Hamilton was asked by an atheist neighbour, “What exactly is this new church about?” (What would you say?) The Christian said, “Trying to love the neighbourhood and care for those who've been forgotten.” His friend then said, “that sounds like good news to me.” Interesting, eh?

The reason the Gospel is the most basic reason for hope is that this restoration of all things is God's work, and God will complete it. This is clearly Paul's confidence: “God who began a good work in you [you as individuals, you as a community, you as inhabitants of God's world] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil 1:6)

Of course, none of this solves our immediate problems, whether it's lack of money, decaying old buildings, a shortage of clergy, or congregations being stuck in their ways. I know, I know. Churches will continue to die, individual congregations and even denominations. Those things have happened before in church history.

But when we remember the gospel and God's promise to restore all things, it puts those problems into a different perspective—an eternal perspective. There is hope for the church—but it's not hope because of our clever program strategies or our fundraising schemes or our brilliant leadership. Our hope is that God in Jesus

Christ is at work in this world by his Spirit to renew, recreate, restore, reconcile, all things. After all, as we said at the beginning, He is the God who is always doing new things.