Vancouver’s stony soil: The church in the secular city

by Jason Byassee in the January 6, 2016 issue

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A recently retired theologian in Vancouver, British Columbia, tells a story about a conversation he once had while getting his hair cut. The stylist asked what he did, and he replied, “I teach theology.”

“Really? You believe in God?”

“I do. And the strangest thing I believe about God is that he became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Who’s that?”

Vancouver is known in religious circles for being a very secular city in a secular province in an unchurched part of the continent. According to researchers at the Angus Reid Institute, only 17 percent of British Columbians attend church as often as once a month—lower than Canada’s overall rate of 23 percent. Unofficial observers estimate that the numbers are even lower in Vancouver.

Ed Searcy, the longtime pastor of University Hill Congregation of the United Church of Canada, thinks this trait has a long history: “Look at why people first moved here. It wasn’t for God. It was for money.” The economy of western Canada has always been one of boom and bust, where wealth is based on gold, timber, or oil—or, as is lately the case, property.

Vancouver was once an inexpensive beach village, but between hosting a World Expo in 1986 and a Winter Olympics in 2010, the city remade itself into a great metropolitan region. Surrounded by spectacular scenery, it is known worldwide for its urban livability.

It's now also ranked among the most expensive places in the world to live. Canada came out of the real estate crash of 2008 relatively unscathed. Its banks never overly invested in subprime mortgages. Real estate continues to look like a safe investment. With the U.S. border to the south, mountains to the north, and an ocean to the west, there's not a lot of land to go around. Tim Dickau, pastor of Grandview Calvary Baptist Church, showed me a condemned house on a piece of property the church bought for $80,000 decades ago. It recently sold for $1.3 million. (A local quip is that BC stands for "bring cash.")

On the culture front, British Columbia is the California of Canada: marijuana laws are looser, hippies and retirees flock here (sometimes they're one and the same), and the ocean and ski slopes offer enticing alternatives to being in church on Sunday morning. The way British Columbians approach whale sightings, exercise, sushi, and indigenous art may suggest that religion hasn't disappeared here—it has only found a new form.

In *What Happened to Christian Canada?*, Mark Noll notes that in the period just after World War II Canadians were actually more religious than Americans. No one is quite sure why a steep drop occurred, but the decline of the United Church of Canada is part of the story.

Phyllis Airhart, in *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, chronicles how the United Church was created in 1925 by a merger of Methodists, Congregationalists, and (most strands of) Presbyterians in hopes of offering "friendly service" to the nation. Airhart says that for 40 years the United Church focused on shaping a Christian Canada, and in the early 1960s it could feel satisfied with its numerical strength. The next generation focused on diversity, expressing shame over Christians' treatment of indigenous peoples. Now the UCC worries about empty pews and unused buildings. In other words, as Christendom collapsed, a church that was built on Christendom collapsed too.

In Vancouver as in many other parts of the Pacific Northwest, there is no ecclesial "home team" in the way that Lutherans predominate in parts of the Midwest or

Baptists pervade the South. The United Church, the Presbyterians, and the Anglicans all have historically great congregations that offer vibrant ministries, but none can claim dominance.

All mainline denominations struggle to catch what might be the new wind of the Spirit in Cascadia: Asian immigration. British Columbia has taken in thousands of Chinese from Hong Kong and from the mainland of the People's Republic. About 30,000 Chinese immigrants have entered Canada every year since 2000, amounting to 15 percent of all immigrants to Canada. It's estimated that by 2031 there will be 800,000 Chinese in Vancouver—a quarter of the city's population.

Reginald Bibby, a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge, told *Maclean's* magazine that mainline churches for many years counted on immigrants from Europe to populate their pews. Now it's evangelical and Catholic congregations that benefit from the immigration from Asia. "If you have stock in the United Church or the Anglican Church, Presbyterians or Lutherans, you're going to lose a lot of money."

Though Vancouver offers some of the rockiest terrain for churches in North America, some vibrant things are happening on the ground. A lot of that vibrancy is connected to immigration.

David Ley, a geography professor at the University of British Columbia, points out that the newcomers from Asia are generally well off financially (Ley's book is titled *Millionaire Migrants*). Soohwan Park, a Korean-Canadian church leader, comments: "These are not boat people. They don't need help with food stamps."

Some of these immigrants have found their way to West Point Grey Baptist Church. West Point Grey is one of the neighborhoods that has changed the most in recent years. Its mid-20th century modest housing stock is worth ten times what it was when built, and its streets are dotted with luxury cars. Some of the immigrants arrived as Baptists.

New members early on started a cooking class at church so that new arrivals from Asia could navigate Canadian grocery stores and learn how to cook macaroni and cheese. The leaders called the class Cross Cultural Cuisine and expected maybe ten people to show up. Thirty did, and the numbers kept growing. Two hundred people signed up for the class on cooking a turkey dinner at Christmas. And the class developed an element of mutual exchange: the Asian-Canadians taught Anglos how

to cook dumplings. Pastor Matt Kitchener says the group draws lots of mothers of small kids whose husbands are back in China on business.

Just because these households have money doesn't mean they have no needs—including the need for friendship. A report by the Vancouver Foundation in 2013 found that most people in the city can't name more than two neighbors. In serving this population, the church has found a renewed sense of mission.

Another example of faithful mission on the immigrant highway is Tenth Church, formerly Tenth Avenue Alliance (it shortened its name to avoid confusion with a political party). Pastor Ken Shigematsu, a Japanese-Canadian, has developed a megachurch of some 2,000 Sunday worshipers at five sites, a number that swells to more than 4,000 on Easter or Christmas. "He's an evangelist," says the noted Canadian-American evangelist Leighton Ford. "He exists to reach the next person."

The ground from which this harvest has sprung did not look so promising when Shigematsu arrived as senior pastor in the mid-1990s. The church had 100 worshipers and had seen 20 pastors in 20 years. It is located in Mount Pleasant, Vancouver's first suburb (now a part of the city itself). Shigematsu's predecessors in the Christian and Missionary Alliance congregation considered moving out of Mount Pleasant to a cheaper and smaller facility.

But the church committed itself to staying put. The church's elders could see that the city was becoming more diverse, and they stuck by Shigematsu. He worked like he had when he was a "7-11 man" for Sony in Tokyo—someone who leaves his apartment at 7 a.m. and does not return until 11 p.m. (Corporate experience seems common among pastors of growing churches here.)

A new approach to using musical instruments besides the organ and the power of Shigematsu's preaching began to make a difference. His sermons are intelligent and winsome, and people tell him that he speaks "like a normal person," perhaps contrasting him to the more theatrical style of evangelical preachers in the United States. His creative style of teaching, a key to his ministry, is evident in his book *God in My Everything*.

He describes himself as being on the left wing of evangelicals in Canada, which would put him far to the left of U.S. evangelicals. He draws on Catholic mysticism and piety, and several of Tenth Church's sites celebrate communion weekly. While his denomination is adamantly against gays in leadership, Shigematsu says that gay

and lesbian members have an important place in the community.

Unusual for a multisite congregation, Shigematsu preaches at all five services in person. He says delivering sermons via video screen wouldn't be regarded as authentic in a place like Vancouver. He reaches back into the best tradition of his denomination, drawing inspiration from the Canadian founder of the C&MA, A. B. Simpson, who focused much of his own ministry on outreach to immigrants.

A story that is part of Tenth's mythology is that of a local sex worker who was pouring her heart out to her pimp about her troubles. He said, "I can't help you. But the people at Tenth Avenue Alliance might be able to." In 2010, Tenth helped lead the Buying Sex Is Not a Sport campaign to keep antitrafficking laws from being loosened during the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Much of Tenth's growth comes from pan-Asian immigration. Second- and third-generation folks from China, the Philippines, and Taiwan feel comfortable with Shigematsu's ethnicity and with him being Canadian. At a recent dinner for new members, a Malaysian immigrant spoke of how baptism in her country can get one disowned by Taoist or Buddhist parents. "It's the same in some families in Japan," Shigematsu responded. "You can go to church all you want with no objection, but baptism is costly."

Another story told by the Tenth community is about a homeless man who slept under the church's awning and one night froze to death. Shigematsu was prompted to begin a program called Out of the Cold. The program was so successful in reaching the homeless that the city intervened, saying Tenth needed a permit for such work. Tenth began to apply for the permit, but other religious groups asked them not to, since it would set a precedent: other religious groups—some with fewer resources than Tenth—would have to hire lawyers to file for their permits. Tenth held off, and the city dropped its request.

"If we'd have ministered to folks at the Vancouver Royal Yacht Club, they'd have had no problem," Shigematsu said, referring to city officials. He added: "Working with the poor is not extracurricular. It's what the church has done for millennia."

There are megachurches larger than Tenth in Vancouver. The Mennonite Brethren, having dropped their ethnic distinctives and emphasis on pacifism, have congregations numbering in the thousands downtown (Westside Church) and in the suburbs (Willingdon Church). The Baptists have the largest congregation in the area,

Village Church in Surrey. Coastal Church downtown has rock concert–quality music. All the congregations have quite conservative theology. They're all led by Canadians.

The church planting network that encourages them, called C2C (from Psalm 72:8, a vision for church renewal across Canada), has some American ideas and money behind it. But if a church seems too American, I was told, Canadians won't come. Some conservative evangelical church plant efforts have had relatively little success here. The secret, it seems, is a can-do attitude without visible American trappings.

Some of that attitude is displayed by Tim Dickau at Grandview Calvary Baptist Church. He grew up among quite conservative Baptists on the Alberta prairie. For him, attending Regent, the evangelical seminary in Vancouver, was a stretch to the left. At Regent he developed a love for

N. T. Wright's biblical scholarship and for Catholic spiritual traditions. And he found that he was indeed a Baptist. "I've always said that if you combined Anabaptists' stance over against the world with a Reformed desire to transform society and Catholic spiritual practice, you'd have a church."

Dickau's ministry in Vancouver began when he was asked to explore new options for ministry at a long-established church. He found a congregation that had quit. The Sunday school rooms had garbage in them. Members commuted in from the suburbs, and they had already decided to close the church but hadn't told the new pastor.

Dickau got to work interviewing neighbors for six months. What was missing in their lives? he asked. And what would they wish for from a church like GCBC? Most had no idea the church existed, but they told him that they needed space for community events.

So the church opened its doors for everything from salsa dancing to a hip-hop opera. One woman Dickau met at the park lamented her loneliness. He asked her, "Want to be in a new small group?"

"I remember reading that it would take ten years to get the church healthy," he says, looking back. "I thought that was ridiculous. But that's how long it took."

He has continued to plunge into the neighborhood (he wrote a book titled *Plunging into the Kingdom Way*). The church has offered meals for the homeless, and it created a pottery studio that helps people on the streets or on disability learn a trade and supplement their incomes. Its work with refugees yielded Kinbrace—an organization dedicated to helping refugees navigate Canada's labyrinthine immigration policies. The church's brochure for immigrants on legal issues has been adopted across Canada.

News that schools had cut arts funding yielded a community arts group called the Eastside Story Guild. City refusal to let the church do homeless ministry without a permit birthed a creative partnership with a local Laundromat, where the homeless can wash clothes and connect with social workers. As the neighborhood has gentrified, GCBC has launched ministries to professors and business leaders.

Dickau doesn't align the church with the culture. He critiques Canadian consumerism and individuality. That emphasis led to the creation of an intentional Christian community. The church owns some 17 houses in which members live in community—some with refugees, some with addicts. The church has also raised some $9 million to build affordable housing in a city in desperate need of it. Units will go up this spring to house some 20 families in need, and families from the church will be involved to help foster community. Dickau explains this ministry with a quote from Jean Vanier: "In the past, Christians who wanted to follow Jesus opened hospitals and schools. Now that there are many of these, Christians must commit themselves to these new communities of welcome, to live with people who have no other family and to show them that they are loved and . . . that they, in turn, can love and give life to others."

Neighbors of GCBC sometimes get annoyed at the visible presence of the vulnerable in a neighborhood that has transitioned from deteriorated to toney. At one community forum, a neighbor suggested that a distant warehouse would be a better place for the homeless. One homeless man responded, "But this is our neighborhood. We live here all the time. You only see us when we come to church."

Despite some neighbors' opposition, the city granted permits for the new housing project, called Co:Here. Dickau plans to start an organization to teach other churches how to offer affordable housing on underused land. Many are tempted to sell off property or air rights to developers. "Don't sell!" Dickau pleads. "What if the church in Vancouver became known as a provider of affordable housing?"

Although GCBC is healthy, it is not especially large. It has two worship services of some 150 people each. None of its several pastors is full-time. Each of these entrepreneurial initiatives funds itself independently. Dickau acknowledged one key asset: a wealthy family in the church that knows how to give money away creatively.

Dickau was ticketed for DUI a few years ago. Some leaders at the church wanted to keep it quiet, but he decided he needed to confess publicly at a Sunday service. Afterward, he processed to the center of the church, where church members laid hands on him and prayed for him. Then others started to confess their own sins. “If Tim can do it, I can too,” they said. Revival broke out where there could have been a cover-up or a scripted confession.

“For those of you not normally here, we don’t do this every week!” Dickau concluded. But actually, they do. They form a community of those being made whole in a world that is broken.

Another kind of outreach is done by Pacific Theatre, led by Ron Reed, who studied at Regent College. Regent’s founders were Plymouth Brethren with a low view of ordination. They wanted to influence culture, not just church. So when Reed approached Regent founder James Houston to ask whether he should act or preach, Houston suggested that the church had enough pastors but not enough actors.

In the mid-1980s, the sorts of plays Reed wanted to act in weren’t being staged in Vancouver, so he started his own theater company. Pacific Theatre’s mission statement proclaims that it exists “to serve Christ in our community by creating excellent theatre.” Last year Pacific Theatre won more local theater awards than any other company. But for its first decade of life it was ignored by local media.

Reed insists he doesn’t offer “Christian” theater. “It’s a bad adjective but a good noun,” he said. PT shares with other evangelicals an obsession with C. S. Lewis, having presented *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Freud’s Last Session*, an imagined dialogue between Lewis and the founder of psychoanalysis. It has also produced *Jesus Hopped the ‘A’ Train*, which opens with a prison inmate praying aloud, “Our Father, who art in heaven, Howard be thy name. Howard? How art?—how? How-now? . . . Fuck!!!!”

Indifference to traditional piety notwithstanding, PT has survived and grown due to Christian patronage. Reed says its audience was nearly all Christian in its first decade, but has grown to where the majority of the audience may be non-Christian.

“There’s a common belief that if you’re an artist in the church, you’re an outsider, underappreciated, and unsupported. But we wouldn’t have lasted ten years if not for all the support from fellow Christians.”

PT reflects the unusual soil of Vancouver. There are other faith-based theater companies in North America, but they tend to play it safer. And Vancouver has plenty of theater that tends not to wade into matters of belief. “A place gets the theater it deserves,” Reed suggests. Evangelicals on the west coast of Canada tend to be more open and accepting. “I do believe PT has significantly shifted the culture of Vancouver,” Reed said.

The church is different in different settings, befitting a faith premised on the incarnation. Christian institutions in Vancouver succeed by being engaged with the culture, not by condemning it. They teach the faith clearly and winsomely. Their walls are permeable. And they stay at their ministry for decades, showing a trait that calls to mind the title of a book by longtime Regent professor Eugene Peterson: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

If Vancouver shows us the secular city of the future, these institutions show us ways that the church can still have a powerful witness. Stony soil requires more creative gardeners.

The print edition of this article states, incorrectly, that Southern Baptist church-growth efforts have had little success in Canada. This online edition was corrected on December 29, 2015. We regret the error.