

By Matt Gardner
STAFF WRITER

HINDSIGHT IS 20-40



A COLUMN SERIES LAST JANUARY IN THE *ANGLICAN JOURNAL* INVITED YOUNG LEADERS IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA TO OFFER THEIR THOUGHTS ABOUT THE FUTURE. WE ASKED THEM TO REVISIT THEIR ASSUMPTIONS AFTER A TUMULTUOUS YEAR.



“Gone by 2040?” asked the *Anglican Journal* on the front page of its January 2020 edition. That provocative headline, and the issue as a whole, was a response to new data gathered by the Rev. Neil Elliot which painted a picture of ongoing church decline. In a [presentation](#) to the Council of General Synod at its November 2019 meeting,

Elliot had warned that if current trends continued, there would be “no members, attenders or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately 2040.”

These statistics—which Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the church, called a “reality check”—prompted new concerns for the future of the church. For its January issue, the *Journal* included a column series, “20-40 vision,” which provided Anglicans between the ages of 20 and 40 years old with an opportunity to envision what that future might look like.

Since the publication of this column series, the world has changed a great deal. The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, massive economic dislocation and resulting social turmoil have affected almost every aspect of our lives. Such seismic changes underscore the difficulty of predicting the future—and the need to continually re-examine past assumptions in light of new developments.



If a feeling of instability pervades the world today, it is one familiar to many Anglicans who have grown up with the church in an epoch of decline.

Case in point: Canon Martha Tatarnic, whose 20-40 vision column bore the title “[The declining church formed me.](#)” In this piece, Tatarnic reflected on growing up in the struggling rural church of St. James Hanover, a two-point parish that could not sustain the salary of a full-time priest. She recalled her decision to enter seminary and spend much time and money studying a field where a job was by no means guaranteed.

Living in uncertain times is therefore nothing new for Tatarnic—nor, in her view, is it for the Anglican Church of Canada.

“I don’t feel like I’ve ever grown up in or known a church that felt particularly stable,” Tatarnic says. “So it’s not like the rug has been pulled out from underneath me in some fundamental way. I would even say that beyond the church, too. I’ve grown up in a time when the environmental crisis has always felt very urgent and like a big shakeup is about to happen—and sure enough, a big shakeup is happening.”

“I don’t want to suggest that I haven’t been stunned by the past seven months, because of course I have,” she adds. “I wasn’t paying attention to what scientists and I think economists have been saying for a long time about the possibility of a pandemic really shutting everything down. I wasn’t expecting this. But at the same time, I haven’t grown up expecting stability either in the church or in the world.”

For that reason, Tatarnic believes much of the content of her article still stands. She wrote at the time that many other institutions besides the church had had to reinvent themselves—an observation that holds more true than ever as COVID-19 forces the closure of businesses such as restaurants, movie theatres and live music venues, and tanks entire sectors, like the travel and fashion industries.

Since the start of the pandemic, Tatarnic has witnessed “huge growth” in stewardship, with many people stepping up to offer financial aid to St. George’s Anglican Church in St. Catharines, where she serves as rector. Outreach ministry has also grown.

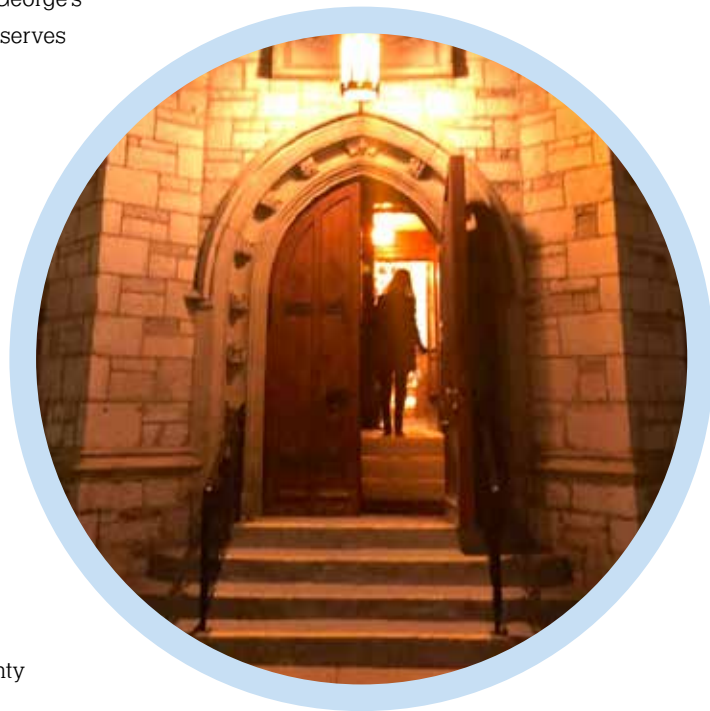
“I’ve seen our outreach ministries just flourish so quickly, in ways that it seems like, pre-COVID, would have taken oodles and zoodles of meetings and things to plan and figure out and finances to line up,” Tatarnic says. “Instead it’s just like, ‘Well, we could do a Wednesday night takeout dinner,’ and boom, next week it’s happening.”

In her column, Tatarnic wrote, “The thing about expecting God to act is that we can rarely anticipate what God’s activity is going to look like.” That theme has continued in much of her preaching since the start of the pandemic—suggesting that one must be willing to enter into uncertainty when looking expectantly to God.

She also points to the dangers of the Anglican Church of Canada focusing too much on its own structures.

“Those seeds of renewal that are definitely at work in our church right now, there’s a really great way of suffocating those, and that is by giving in to the anxiety and the desire for self-preservation,” Tatarnic says.

“The institution loves to protect the institution.... I think we’re really being called to look expectantly for that promise of how God is doing a new thing, and we can trust that, and maybe let go of some of the fear, anxiety and self-preservation ruling the day.”



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*—Canon Martha Tatarnic, rector,
St. George’s Anglican Church, St. Catharines, Ont.*

PHOTO: “LIVESTREAM IN ISOLATION.” CONTRIBUTED



“I think the church will continue to suffer and to become weaker because God has allowed this, along with everything else, to fall upon it. I think there’ll be a continual winnowing, and it’ll be difficult for Christians.”

—The Rev. Cole Hartin, rector, St. Luke’s Anglican Church, Saint John, N.B.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

The Rev. Cole Hartin believed church statistics offered further evidence that “[Anglicans in Canada are in exile](#),” as he described it in his 20-40 vision column.

Hartin compared the church’s “exile in a culture we helped create” to that of the ancient Israelites, “few in number, being driven and scattered by the Lord.”

Despite these discouraging signs, he saw a “purgative role” by God in the church’s decline that would provide Anglicans with greater humility. But he also detected signs of growth—particularly in the North, but also in his own congregation of St. Luke’s Anglican Church in Saint John, N.B. Along with the 20-40 vision columns, the *Anglican Journal* profiled St. Luke’s in its January issue as an example of “green shoots” across the church: congregations and parishes that had managed to buck the trend of decline. Reflecting on his column in mid-October, Hartin says that the trends he wrote about in January had, for the most part, only accelerated.

“I think the pandemic has put more pressure on struggling congregations, and probably the ones that were in decline aren’t going to recover from this—or if they are going to recover, it’s going to be much weaker than before,” Hartin says. “The ones that were growing I think will be knocked back a bit and have to retake some of that ground when the air clears a little more.”

St. Luke’s is one Anglican congregation that has been “knocked back a bit,” despite the fact that Atlantic Canada is one of the least affected regions in the country by COVID-19. Even after St. Luke’s began offering in-person worship services again in May, Hartin estimates that only 60-65% of congregants had returned.

“A handful of them have reached out and said they won’t be coming back unless there’s a vaccine,” he says.

“It’s been frustrating because we were steadily and increasingly growing as a congregation—financially, in terms of our Sunday attendance, and in the impact that we were making in the community—and then we’ve been bumped back to where we were four or five years ago.”

While Hartin noticed an initial “flurry” of online activity after St. Luke’s started holding worship and activities online, he finds that too has tapered off.

If a certain pessimism, now as before, pervades Hartin’s thoughts, so too does his conviction that God remains present with the Anglican Church of Canada.

“I think the church will continue to suffer and to become weaker because God has allowed this, along with everything else, to fall upon it,” Hartin says. “I think there’ll be a continual winnowing, and it’ll be difficult for Christians.

“But I think all of that has to be couched in the goodness of God, that God will not abandon us... This has all happened already to the church in scripture, with Israel and its suffering and chastisement, and in the disciples in their scattering and denying their faith. But somehow, or maybe because of that weakness, God uses the church for his purposes and as a broken vessel to show forth his glory in the world.”



PHOTO: RECTORY WINDOW / CONTRIBUTED



“In terms of statistically motivated survival stories, the Anglican Church of Canada’s is neither the most interesting, nor the most important.”

—Canon Jeffrey Metcalfe, canon theologian for the diocese of Quebec

PHOTO: ANDREY YURLOV / SHUTTERSTOCK

The crises and instability enveloping the world today, and the comparative lack of relevance of the church’s own struggles, were encapsulated in the title of Canon Jeffrey Metcalfe’s 20-40 vision column, [“Living as footnotes to the story.”](#)

Focusing on the collapse of the natural environment, Metcalfe said that two church communities he has served are slowly falling into the ocean due to rising sea levels. The church’s decline, he noted, was occurring against a backdrop of shifting rain patterns, ocean acidification and extreme weather events leading to global food and water shortages and mass extinctions. “In terms of statistically motivated survival stories,” he wrote, “the Anglican Church of Canada’s is neither the most interesting, nor the most important.”

Ten months later, Metcalfe believes his main point—“that the institutional survival of the Anglican Church of Canada as we have known it” is “not the most important thing in our world right now”—might be a more widely held view among Anglicans.

“I’m not sure I could write that article again, because I think it’s now just obvious to people,” Metcalfe says. “I don’t think people, if you ask them—even if you ask priests, [who] have maybe more of an economic interest in the survival of the institutional church—if you asked them, ‘What do you think is the most important [issue], what were you talking today about in your home and with your colleagues?’

I’m guessing the institutional survival [of the church] wouldn’t be at the top of their minds.”

“Whether we’re dealing with the various iterations of white supremacy that are in our culture that have been more and more brought to the attention of folks who could previously be ignorant of that; whether it’s climate change ... all of these issues have just been overwhelming, I think, in the year of 2020.”

For Metcalfe, national church governance structures and attendance statistics—while important—are “significantly less interesting and important than ... finding a new way as Anglican Christians of belonging in this place in the landscapes that we’re in,” which he says will require a large dose of humility from Anglicans.





“Seeing the church be more involved in Indigenous issues makes me look at the church in more of a comforting light, as if I feel like I’d be supported by them as an individual.”

—Shilo Clark, youth member of the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples

The relationship of the Anglican Church of Canada to Indigenous peoples is one that has required a large dose of humility in recent decades, as the church recognized its role in the history of colonialism and the residential school system. In perhaps the most prominent recent example, former primate Fred Hiltz offered an apology at General Synod 2019 on behalf of the church for spiritual harm caused to Indigenous peoples.

In his 20-40 vision column, “[God truly works in mysterious ways](#),” Shilo Clark noted that as a young Indigenous Anglican, the passing of legislation at that same General Synod for a self-determining Indigenous church was a “huge deal” for him. By showing that the traditions taken from Indigenous people were “no longer seen as evil” and “have a place in worship,” this adaptation by the church gave him “the fuel to go forward and help educate my young peers—and in a world where Indigenous folks face racism in their lives, I hope the church can now feel like a safe place to belong to.”

Shortly after the publication of Clark’s column, the opposition of Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs to the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline on their traditional territory exploded into solidarity rallies and blockades across Canada. Leaders of the Anglican Church of Canada, including Primate Linda Nicholls and National Indigenous Archbishop Mark MacDonald, signed public statements of support of the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs.

Clark says this expression of “standing in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en” showed progress in terms of the church being a safe place for Indigenous people. He said that his grandmother is the only Indigenous member of her Anglican congregation, the vast majority of whom are white.

“My grandma would always go to church and I would kind of go with her, but it wasn’t anything that I really was steadfast to.... It was just uncomfortable for the longest time,” Clark says.

“Seeing the church be more involved in Indigenous

issues makes me look at the church in more of a comforting light, as if I feel like I’d be supported by them as an individual—whereas before I didn’t really feel that, because I didn’t see any representation or necessarily any support for Indigenous folks, at that time anyhow.”

Like other Anglican parishes across the country, the congregation that Clark and his grandmother attend has been hit hard by COVID-19. Most members are over 50 and therefore at higher risk.

“My grandma’s not going to church,” Clark says. “She’s not gathering with the congregation because of COVID. She’s very, very afraid to pretty much leave her house. That has created a huge effect on church numbers in terms of folks that are attending physically. But I have seen a rise in folks that are attending virtually.”

Clark offered the example of a young friend who had not attended church in years, but recently began attending online services at his church—a development he says gives him hope.

In his column, Clark wrote, “Many times God has been with me, and due to the bleak nature of the times through which I was living, I failed to see him.” He suggests that many others who are now enduring such trying times in the era of COVID-19 may be looking for a boost of faith.

“With the bleak times that we are going through right now, I feel like a lot more people, even more so than when I wrote that column, are in need of guidance, either from friends or family or the church,” he says.

At the end of his column on church decline, Clark quoted Matthew 18:20, in which Jesus says: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them.” In the midst of a pandemic where Anglicans are unable to gather physically for worship, Clark describes this passage as even more relevant now.

“I think it holds a lot more weight now than it did when I wrote the column,” he says.





For too long, both Catholic and Protestant churches were filled with nominalist Christians for whom church has been a mere social club to exercise power, influence and money, rather than a school by which one is saved—that is, reshaped and reformed by God.

— The Rev. Leigh Silcox



In his own 20-40 vision column "[Looking towards God's own pruning](#)," the Rev. Leigh Silcox challenged readers by suggesting that the decline of the Anglican Church of Canada may be a good thing, despite the accompanying pain.

"For too long," Silcox wrote, "both Catholic and Protestant churches were filled with nominalist Christians for whom church has been a mere social club to exercise power, influence and money, rather than a school by which one is saved—that is, reshaped and reformed by God."

He described church decline as a kind of "pruning" that gave renewed humility to those called to persevere in leadership, worship and service. Pragmatic questions such as whether or not to continue with full-time priests, whether to rent facilities or expand house churches, and so on are "irrelevant," he wrote, "if we do not first commit to remain where we are, despite the heartbreak of decline."

Since writing that column, the experience of 2020 made two things clear to Silcox: "Anglicanism obviously is still in decline" and "we're going to have to adapt far more quickly" to new realities.

Among these new realities, he says, is that likely for at least the next "couple of years, until we have a vaccine, numbers are going to be low, because the majority of our people in every congregation are actually in the vulnerable category just due to age."

Other members of congregations have family members in their households that may fall into the vulnerable category. Still more parishioners are health-care workers who may balk at the prospect of contracting the virus and inadvertently infecting their patients.

For that reason, Silcox says, the Anglican Church of Canada will have to adapt rapidly in terms of expanding worship and ministry online. That shift will in turn

lead to questions of logistics, of how the church will resource new ministries, of whether it might need to train parishioners in use of technology—and even to the meaning of Anglicanism itself.

“What we’ve been doing in the past in terms of how we’ve structured ourselves around a physical building, around a physical geographic location—that was on the way out anyway, simply for the matter of fact that people had cars and could travel much further distances, and would,” Silcox says.

“Now that question is present again in some new ways, and so it’s pushing us to ask the question again, but in a brand-new, accelerated context: What is Anglicanism? Who are we? How do we see ourselves as a church being able to do ministry?”

For some time, Silcox says, the Anglican Church of Canada has been “extremely self-focused, extremely inward-looking,” which now puts it at a disadvantage compared to other churches that have been more “outwardly” focused.

“Most people were not just rolling through the doors of a church because it existed,” he adds. “We had trouble adapting to a model where that was no longer particularly relevant or effective. So now where people can’t even really walk into the doors of a church, how are we going to reach people?”

The answer to these questions, Silcox adds, could involve everything from changing the skill sets required by clergy, who will need to do more of their ministry online, to “a radical reorientation of our entire diocesan structure, and thereby what a parish is, what it means to be a parish, what it means to be a disciple of Christ, and what it means to actually minister to a community.”



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[Would the church] pour [new wine] into the old wineskins and lose everything when those wineskins burst? Or will we find new wineskins to pour the new wine into?

— *The Rev. Alison Hari-Singh*



“New wineskins for new wine” was the call put forward by the Rev. Alison Hari-Singh in her 20-40 vision column, in which she outlined the changes wrought by theological shifts, new developments in scientific knowledge, and the damage to church reputations caused by sexual abuse scandals and the residential school system.

These new realities, she wrote, compelled the Anglican Church of Canada to “reimagine the entire edifice of our faith” and to “embrace a radical theology of risk, unhindered by suspicion and fear of the unknown.” Faced with “new wine,” Hari-Singh asked, would the church “pour it into the old wineskins and lose everything when those wineskins burst? Or will we find new wineskins to pour the new wine into?”

Reflecting on her column, Hari-Singh notes that Anglicans were shaken late last year by statistics that pointed to the possible disappearance of the church by 2040. In the wake of the pandemic, she says, “many are now wondering whether 2040 has become the present moment. Will the Anglican Church survive the pandemic and thrive beyond it?”

Hari-Singh suggests that COVID-19 is offering Anglicans the chance for “taste-tests” of the “new wine”—that is, new ways of following in the Way of Jesus. She offers three examples of such “taste-tests.”

One is increased movement outdoors, which Hari-Singh says can provide spiritual discipline that “helps us tap into the calm of God’s presence as we navigate the present crisis.” Another is embracing solitude, helping Anglicans cultivate the disciplines of contemplative prayer, *lectio divina*, journaling and personal reflection. “This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deepen our love of God with all our heart, soul and mind,” Hari-

Singh says. “We need not wither on the vine.”

A third “taste-test,” she says, is finding the sacred in the ordinary. COVID-19 has forced Christians out of their churches and sacred spaces, obliging many to live without the sacraments or singing hymns—but also illustrating how “our whole lives are filled with God’s goodness, not just those sacred moments and places when God’s presence seems obviously palpable.”

These “taste-tests” in turn point to certain “new wineskins,” Hari-Singh says. These include the idea that “smaller is better”—that Anglicans can escape the “megachurch rat race” and develop more tight-knit communities that are genuinely able to care for one another. They include the need for a “theology of technology,” with the Anglican Church of Canada’s future possibly depending on its capacity to adapt theologically to technology.

Finally, she says, these new “wineskins” could include the retrieval of traditional forms of pastoral care. While clergy have always been present in people’s lives, such moments may become “more personal and more ordinary” in the future.

“We will visit parishioners in their homes, sharing a physically distanced Holy Communion,” Hari-Singh says. “We will baptize children with only the parents present. We will be more visible in our neighbourhoods where we live and where we shop. Neighbourhood ministry and priestly presence will transform the church, mobilizing us in new ways that allow us to see ourselves as church beyond the walls of our buildings.”

“I am cautiously hopeful,” she adds. “Perhaps in the middle of this struggle, something amazing might actually be happening.”



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— The Rev. Alison Hari-Singh.



society, Lao says, God's dominion remains over the world so long as the Holy Spirit dwells within those who follow Jesus Christ.

"The embers of the Church seem to glow dimmer, but she can again be stoked ablaze by heavenly winds," he says. "In whatever crisis the church finds herself, her call remains to be faithful to God, see to her mission, look to Him who provides for and abides with her, and point to Him from whom our hope of rescue and renovation for an ill and shattered world is realised."

Lao believes that that call rings true especially in the present time—one characterized by "digitised disembodiment" and social displacement.

"Perhaps we are witnessing the swelling of a cultural and religious upheaval in liberal democratic societies, further aggravated by the pandemic, partisan politics, the frenzied circus of social media and the balkanising of civil discourse," he says. "And it is perhaps in every worldly upheaval that religious revivals may erupt.

"While our sovereign God permits time and place in this world for Western Anglicanism to persist, His will and command are for us in the Anglican Church to uphold and obey. We march ahead to twenty years, working and obeying Him who is our gracious and empowering Lord. Who knows, Jesus may entrust to us much longer than twenty years and so much more. Let us pray so. And let us be faithful with the little that we have and not be sparing with the little we have." ■



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— *The Rev. Orvin Lao:*

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