

‘No, they weren’t in vain’

A retired chaplain and Afghanistan veteran ponders Canada’s longest war



PHOTO: REUTERS/DAN RIEDLHUBER

Soldiers of Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry mourn in front of a photo of a fallen comrade after a 2006 memorial service in Edmonton. The service was for seven soldiers who had recently been killed in Afghanistan.

Matt Gardner
STAFF WRITER

The rapid collapse of the Western-backed Afghan government this year following the withdrawal of U.S. forces and subsequent return to power of the Taliban have prompted discussion about the legacy of the war in Afghanistan. Canadian troops were deployed in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014, making the conflict Canada’s longest war.

Between May 2008 and February 2009, Canon Doug Friesen served in Afghanistan as the senior Task Force Kandahar chaplain. Now retired from the Canadian Armed Forces, where he was an Anglican chaplain for 31 years, Friesen is currently an active priest in the diocese of British Columbia and an honorary associate at Christ Church Cathedral.

With the approach of Remembrance Day, the *Anglican Journal* spoke to Friesen for his thoughts on developments in Afghanistan. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q. What went through your head as you were hearing news about the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan?

A. I was sad and disheartened. We’d all hoped for a different outcome.

Q. Do you now feel that the war and deaths and injuries were in vain, or have you heard that from others?

A. That’s the central question. That’s the question I’ve been struggling with. My answer is no, they weren’t in vain, and here’s how my thoughts have gone over that.

First of all, when the government sends its military into an area like that, it’s not good. It’s a bad situation, chaotic. Other means haven’t worked, so the military goes in. There are forces at work that you have no control over, and Afghanistan was particularly bad that way. Trying to predict an outcome was just extremely difficult.

But I think that yes, most Canadian Forces members

See **AFGHANISTAN**, p. 3

Long-term care and ‘the great revealer’

What has the pandemic shown us about how we care for the aged?

First in a two-part series

By Amy MacLachlan

SPECIAL TO THE ANGLICAN JOURNAL

When military personnel were deployed to long-term care homes in Ontario and Quebec during the pandemic’s first wave in the spring of 2020, they encountered a system that some had said was in dire need of change even before the pandemic. But COVID-19 brought increased

public attention to the system’s shortcomings as it spread through long-term care homes across the country.

Nearly four-fifths of the Canadians who died during the pandemic’s first six months were residents of long-term care and retirement homes. COVID-19 is, admittedly, an especially dangerous disease for the elderly, but this proportion was high even by

See **‘WILFUL IGNORANCE,’** p. 6



Arctic bishop broadcasts to the pandemic-stricken

Matt Gardner
STAFF WRITER

As the fourth wave of COVID-19 engulfs much of Canada, an Arctic bishop is standing ready to restart a series of weekly radio broadcasts to bolster hope and bring comfort.

From November 2020 to March 2021, Lucy Netser, suffragan bishop of the diocese of the Arctic, hosted a weekly radio program in Arviat, Nunavut, a predominantly Inuit hamlet of some 2,850 people. In a two-hour slot every Sunday, broadcast on local station Arviaqpaluk 96.5 FM, Netser offered morning worship, scripture readings, prayers and

encouragement for the community.

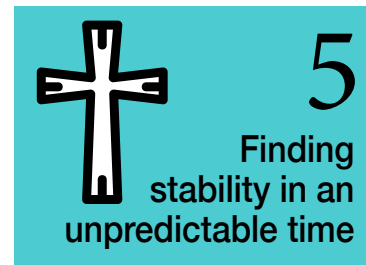
Netser began the broadcasts after a COVID-19 outbreak in Arviat. Health authorities confirmed the first case on Nov. 13, 2020. The hamlet subsequently became by far Nunavut’s worst-hit community, with 339 confirmed cases—more than two-thirds of all cases in the territory as of April 30.

Soon after the appearance of COVID-19, the hamlet imposed a tight lockdown. Netser contacted the local radio committee to ask if she could bring her Christian message to the airwaves. The committee

See **IN NUNAVUT**, p. 2



PHOTO: AKKALAK AIEMPRADIT



PANDEMIC MINISTRY ▶

Note: An earlier version of this article appeared in Contact, newsletter of the Council of the North.

In Nunavut, radio prayers for a locked-down hamlet

Continued from p. 1

responded favourably, and other churches soon followed.

Netser broadcast from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. each Sunday. Other churches had their own slots afterwards, with Arviat Alliance Church starting at 1 p.m., Glad Tidings Church at 3 p.m., and St. Therese Catholic Church at 5 p.m.

"In the Arctic, a lot of people go to church," Netser says. "When something like a pandemic is happening, that's when we really need to be there for each other and encourage each other and pray for each other."

By last spring the crisis had passed. On April 20, Arviat marked two weeks since its last resident had come out of isolation. Many locals celebrated with a parade of vehicles. As churches returned to in-person worship—albeit with masks and attendance limits—Netser ended her radio show and moved 650 km away to Coral Harbour, which had also broadcast prayers via radio during the winter.

While there were no cases of COVID-19 in Coral Harbour as of Sept. 22, Netser said, "I went to the radio station a couple times to learn what to do just in case COVID hits again, so I can do prayers on the radio. I'm quite prepared for that."

She mostly used the Inuktitut version of the *Book of Common Prayer* to lead prayers on the radio, since there is no



▲ Lucy Netser, suffragan bishop, diocese of the Arctic

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

Inuktitut translation of the *Book of Alternative Services*. She also prayed for the community and offered listeners a brief period of silence to pray on their own for people they might be concerned about.

Hymns were a mainstay of the program, with Netser often inviting guests on the air to perform them.

"A lot of people are musical in this community. They sometimes sing over the phone, sometimes more than one person in a house," she said.

Most weeks, Netser delivered a sermon. But sometimes she invited guests to preach, such as retired Anglican bishop Andrew Atagotaaluk. Guests phoned at a certain time to speak on the radio.

Netser said Arviat residents really liked the on-air prayers, sermons, and hymns.

"I'd say we reach more people that way," she said. "Some people don't really like going to the church, but at home, they can have a prayer at home with their family."

She added, "Sometimes, parents call me afterwards saying that they really enjoyed the radio show today, because 'my children were listening with me and praying with me.' Some little kids started knowing my voice, who I was, so that was kinda cute."

Besides church programs on Sundays, Arviaqpaluk offered a range of other radio programs throughout the week, with each business or community organization given an equal two-hour slot. Mondays included

cultural programs. Thursdays provided updates from the health centre. On Fridays listeners could call in to a show focusing on mental health. Content was in a mix of Inuktitut and English—the former being the predominant language in Arviat.

Station manager Laura Tassiuk said community radio was very important in bringing people together during the pandemic, helping residents "be cautious and be careful, and to keep everybody informed so we'll all be on the same page."

She also acknowledged the support community programs can offer for people isolated by the pandemic. "I think it keeps everybody calm and sane," Tassiuk said.

Regardless of whether she returns to the radio to offer prayers and encouragement in Coral Harbour, Netser hoped residents gained encouragement and hope from listening during the peak of the outbreak—and a knowledge that even the hardest times will pass.

"There've been pandemics before and that has passed, and it's going to be like that again," Netser said. She compared the experience of the pandemic to stormy seas that eventually calm, or the aftermath of an earthquake.

"After the earthquake tremors, then there's peace," the bishop said. "It's like that still ... Whatever is happening to you, be encouraged. Whatever you're facing right now, peace is coming." ■



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WAR AND FAITH ▶



▲ Friesen in Afghanistan

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

“These folks put their lives on the line unconditionally.... So I see God at work there for sure.”

—Canon Doug Friesen

Afghanistan: Sin, death—and self-sacrifice

Continued from p. 1

would rather have been there than do nothing and stand by on the sidelines. I think most members wanted to do something.

In one sense, the mission was successful. If the Canadian Forces is all about the defence of Canada, there have been no terrorist attacks on Canada launched from Afghan soil over the last 20 years. So in that sense, that's good. That was a success.

Clearly there was a bigger plan, which was to use the Canadian Forces as one line of operation to provide some security to allow the Afghan people to develop their own institutions and their own national defence force—to strengthen and stabilize the country so that they wouldn't be vulnerable or sympathetic to terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda. That hasn't quite worked out the way we'd hoped.

But then there's another thing going on there. I know that for myself and other members of the forces that went to Afghanistan, you meet the people and you see the challenges they're facing. They've been dealt a really bad hand and they want a future for their kids. They want education for their daughters, and they want an economy and jobs.

You meet the people and you see the challenges, and there's a kind of a shift in priorities. You go there and you just think, "Geez, I'd really like to help these people." I know that was the attitude of a lot of the service members—that they wanted to really help the people of Afghanistan build a better future. So in addition to making the place stable so there's greater international security, they just wanted to help the people as fellow human beings. Those Canadians that died in Afghanistan, they were laying down their lives in service of others, literally. How do you get more meaningful than that?

When you see the images of Kabul and the chaos there, as a Christian, you look at Jesus's crucifixion. That looked like a failure too. But surprise, surprise, things didn't turn out that way. As a Christian again, I believe there's another force at work here that's not dependent on the American military or any other military. This story isn't over yet. I don't think we can predict the outcome even yet, and so I haven't given up hope. I'm hopeful.

I think we can remember the troops that died in Afghanistan on Remembrance Day. It was an honourable death.

Q. Many veterans who served in Afghanistan returned with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Suicide is also an issue. Do you think Canada is adequately supporting its veterans?

A. That's a tough one, and I don't really have an answer to that. I know that when Canada went into Afghanistan, a number of initiatives emerged out of that experience—better training and preparation, for example. There was a program called The Road to Mental Readiness, which is about training people to build resilience in the face of stress. As a chaplain, there's a whole section on spirituality, to draw on spiritual strength to help you face these stresses.

An entire new clinic [network] was formed during those years called the operational stress injury clinics, which were designed to assist folks who came



▲ Two sisters peer from their tent at Shamshatoo Refugee Camp in Northwest Pakistan in this photo from 2008. At the time, the camp was home to more than 75,000 Afghan refugees.

PHOTO: PAUL JEFFREY/ACT

back with PTSD and operational stress injury. There's a chaplain on that team with specialized training.

Another organization that stood up around 2009–10 [is] the Joint Personnel Support Unit, [for] active troops. If they have a stress injury or PTSD, they can be posted to this unit, with the goal of either returning to work or transitioning out to other employment.

To your question, how are they cared for, those folks that transition out of the forces? What's their care like? I just can't tell you. I've lost sight of those folks, and I see in the news that more could be done. I'm sure it could be. But I just can't comment on how they're being treated.

Q. In a 2008 interview with the *National Post*, you said that you felt the war in Afghanistan was just and necessary. At the same time, you said, "I struggle with the role religion plays in the violence here.... I struggle with what to say to people who are mourning.... Sometimes, I think religion has been used as a crutch or a coping mechanism to deny the harsh reality of death and suffering." Speaking to the *Anglican Journal* in 2010, you said you and other soldiers wrestled with questions such as, "Are we really making a contribution? Are we doing more harm than good?"

Have your feelings about the mission and the role of religion in the war changed since then?

A. No, I don't think so. I think that when you're in a mission like Afghanistan, which is so complicated, and obviously the situation now is chaotic and complicated—it wasn't the outcome we'd hoped for—people struggle with that. My own temperament is to struggle with these issues of faith. I think my role as a chaplain has always been to walk with people who are struggling with these issues and not diminish [them]. I don't have any pat answers, for sure, but [I] try and search out deeper understanding in those.

I'd love it if religion made people better, kinder, more loving and just. Unfortunately, that's often not what we see. For a Canadian Christian to go to Afghanistan—the way religion pervades their lives is very impressive and inspiring. We have this secular society in Canada, but in Afghanistan, their faith and religion and religious practice just pervade everything. Pray five times a day—it's very impressive.

So why aren't things better for those people and why is religion a source of conflict?

But I guess also, as a Christian, part of my theology places a very prominent and real place for sin. In Afghanistan, you see the power of sin and death in very vivid, visible, graphic terms. It's a reminder, I think, that we stand in need of God's grace.

Q. Do you see God at work in any of what's happened?

A. In Afghanistan, you saw people who were willing to lay down their lives for the service of others. That's right out of John. Sure, we would have hoped for a better outcome. But these folks put their lives on the line unconditionally, regardless of the outcome, in the hope and the service of other people. So I see God at work there for sure.

Another area is the response to the news of death in the family. I've seen parents who have received the worst news imaginable, the death of a child. In response to their grief, they've carried on the work of their child in charitable work. Boomer's legacy [Cpl Andrew "Boomer" Eykelenboom, who was killed by a suicide bomber in 2006] is one example. There are others. Boomer was a medic who was killed, and his mother has just worked tirelessly for charitable work to help the people of Afghanistan. So I see certainly God at work in that kind of hopeful response to bad news.

But in my faith, I just see God in everything. God's at work in all of it. I often don't know what God's up to, but God doesn't owe me an explanation.

Q. What lessons should Christians and/or Canadians draw from the war in Afghanistan?

A. Entering a war like that, the outcomes are unpredictable. There are so many ambiguities and so many forces at work beyond our control—there are no guarantees about how things are going to work out. Who do we want to be? I think, certainly once committed, military service members and chaplains wanted to do the best we could to help the people, because that's who we are. That's our values and that's who we want to be.

Every day I'm grateful I live in Canada, that's for sure. That's a lesson we sometimes take for granted, but that's an important one to remember. I'll have to keep thinking. ■



Rising to the coronavirus's challenge

How has the pandemic affected Canadian Anglicans?

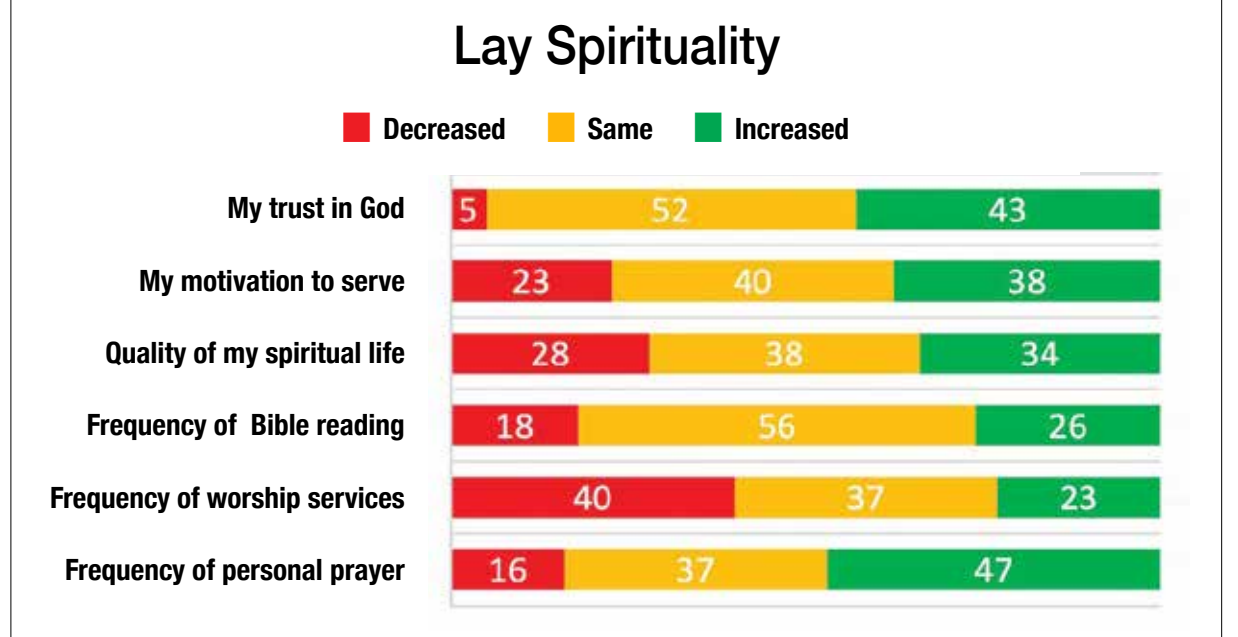
By Neil Elliot

LAST SPRING, Anglicans around the world were invited to take part in an international survey by a pair of U.K. academics called "Coronavirus, the Church and You." The survey ran in three countries: the U.K., the USA and Canada. I wrote a column in the *Anglican Journal* six months ago to invite you to take it, and also to say what I was observing across the country anecdotally (see "Our response ... gives me huge hope," May 2021, p. 4). More than 400 Canadians responded, and now we have data to help us see more clearly. There are some significant surprises in the data, as well as things we would all expect. In this article I want to tell you about three things that stood out for me as I looked at the data.

No going back

We may want to go back to how it was before COVID-19, but only one-third of us believe that we will. Anglicans have mostly accepted that the pandemic has brought significant changes to the church.

Alongside that recognition, there are many of you who are ready to work to help the local church adapt. Three-quarters of the people who responded to the survey think we should prioritize the local church, and one-third of respondents said that they would put in extra work to help. That is no surprise; our local churches are where our faith has been nurtured and expressed through our weekly worship. But it's a wonderfully encouraging number for everyone who works for and cares for our beloved church.



GRAPHIC: CONTRIBUTED

The survey results suggest that, though Canadian Anglicans are attending fewer services than before the pandemic, they are trusting in God and praying more, and feel more motivated to serve the church.

Online services have worked well

I do not believe many Anglican churches had gone "online" before the pandemic. I saw little evidence of this either as a priest in my diocese or as statistician for the national church. We were used to running what we now call "in-person services" and what we used to call just "services." We had little knowledge of or experience in uploading videos to YouTube, or Facebook livestreaming, or using Zoom for anything other than occasional meetings. COVID-19 changed all that, and we found ourselves becoming technically competent both as producers and receivers of the internet media.

What is amazing is that we became really good, really quickly. Your responses showed that those who produced the services overwhelmingly produced content that was professional and engaging. You said it was fit for purpose, with less than one in ten



IMAGE: NEIL ELLIOT

Anglicans have mostly accepted that the pandemic has brought significant changes to the church.

disagreeing. And you were able to access it: only 3 per cent said they couldn't. All of us managed to upgrade our technical competence in order to do this. It was a huge achievement both for the leaders and the congregations.

COVID-19 made us more faithful

It should not be a surprise that our faith flourishes in adversity. It is a New Testament pattern that has been repeated again and again down the centuries. But it is a surprise. The evidence is here that our faith has grown through COVID-19; COVID-19 has been good for our faith. We trust God more, with almost half of us having increased faith. We are praying more—again, almost half of us say this. Maybe time in lockdown has led to more prayer! Our spiritual lives and our motivation to serve have all increased. Each measure of our spiritual lives showed more increase than decrease except the frequency of worship services, and that could be due to the challenges of worship during the pandemic.

The survey also looked at areas I do not have space to cover here. Among them, there is significant data on the mental and spiritual health impacts of the pandemic. These have been both positive and negative. For example, around one-third of clergy find it hard to cope, while another one-third were feeling more creative. There were also very interesting attitudes to Eucharist post-pandemic. You can read about these and more either by seeing the report I have written at www.tinyurl.com/psp3wycj, or by looking at the full data from the people who ran the survey, at: www.yorks.ac.uk/coronavirus-church-and-you.

So there is evidence here to give us all encouragement. The pandemic has challenged the church, and we have risen to the challenge. We have accepted that COVID-19 has brought changes, we have managed to move online and come to value some of the opportunities it brings. We are ready to do the work to help our local church move on. And our faith has grown. ■

Canon Neil Elliot is the Anglican Church of Canada's statistics and research officer. He is also incumbent in the parish of St. Andrew and St. George, Trail, B.C. and dean of the diocese of Kootenay's East Kootenay region.



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Email: jburgess@uvic.ca

SINGING WITH JOY ▶



The illusion of control—and the reality of hope

By Linda Nicholls

ONE OF THE great illusions when life is stable is that we are in control. The pandemic has shattered that illusion; a tiny virus broke through all our expectations. Plans were disrupted; families separated; and many of the ways in which we manage our lives were no longer effective. We discovered our vulnerability, and that we need each other for survival and are not in control.

This may seem self-evident to people who have experienced instability as refugees from wars, climate change or natural disasters. For many other Canadians life has been relatively stable and safe. Now it is unstable, not predictable and not always safe. Some people respond by securing as much as possible. Others embrace the new possibilities; still others respond with anger, frustration and even violence.

How should disciples of Jesus respond to such times? Before the crucifixion, the disciples tried to make Jesus' call fit the expectations of culture and community about earthly power and glory. After the resurrection, they faced the destabilizing wonder of this event and discovered its truth to be the place of their security. In its light, and with the power of the Holy Spirit to guide, they could and would face



IMAGE: OLEKSANDR NAGAIETS

ridicule, imprisonment and beatings with courage and joy, continually sharing the good news in word and action.

We long for stability. We now have glimpses of it, as the pandemic seems to be waning. But whether it returns or not, our lives find their hope each day in another place and we cannot be shaken from its security.

St. Paul knew this security maybe more than others. He surrendered his certainties as a Pharisee and discovered the love of God through the vulnerability of his initial blindness and the witness of followers of Jesus willing to risk guiding him in faith. He would write:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:7-8)

Paul found freedom in Christ. Whether he was in prison, on a sinking ship, preaching in marketplaces or advocating for the gospel with Gentiles he was a passionate, joyful disciple. His letters are filled with encouragement to the emerging Christian communities as he reminded them of the inheritance of faith and joy of the gospel. Whenever I need a reminder of this hope I read one of the opening sections of a Pauline letter like Colossians (1:9-14):

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

I know there is a deep weariness with the ongoing uncertainties around us, the seemingly endless pandemic and inability to plan more than a few weeks at a time. There is a deep exhaustion amongst leaders trying to make the best decisions possible for parishes and dioceses, knowing that anxiety and frustration levels are high. This is a time to stay firm in our focus on the one certainty we have, in life or in death, which is the love of God through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God! ■

Archbishop Linda Nicholls is the primate of the Anglican Church of Canada.

WALKING TOGETHER ▶



To find life on a day like this

By Mark MacDonald

FOR MANY YEARS, I have been troubled by the inability of non-Indigenous people and institutions to receive and grasp the full reality of the pain and challenges of Indigenous life in this land. Statistics and stories are acknowledged with sympathy, but the realization of what this might mean seems completely elusive. People say they know, but things stay the same. Some non-Indigenous people seem to feel that this is the result of Indigenous shortcomings. Others seem unable to stare it in the face because of what they might see about themselves. In the past months, these questions have seemed more urgent. The things that face Indigenous peoples seem magnified. In the context of what we have seen the past few months, the incapacity of people to see the suffering of other people seems more hideous.

The present difficulties facing Indigenous peoples and their churches are as bad as anything experienced in many decades. Indigenous communities are

enduring a pandemic in the middle of gigantic threats and suffering related to climate disruption (wildfires, for example). The ongoing incapacity of colonial governments to dismantle the economic and social strangulation that they have imposed upon Indigenous communities for centuries was highlighted by politicians' avoidance of this topic in our recent election. We are in an especially toxic mix of fear, frustration and despair.

In the midst of this, Indigenous peoples were hit hard by the reminder of the pain and suffering of their children in and through the Indian residential schools. Elders and survivors have long known that the unaccounted remains of children were present across the land, lost and hidden in the indifference and hostility of colonial systems to Indigenous life. Many, if not most, of the survivors and elders have expressed surprise at how deeply these revelations have hurt them. They were unprepared for the way the public acknowledgement of this gruesome reality would make them relive and realize the hatred and cruelty of colonial schools.

The pain increased when it was clear that the initial intense moments of honesty and recognition by the rest of Canada were to be short-lived. The shame and sadness Canadians felt became anger and blame. Instead of facing this as a whole people called to repentance and new life, many escaped national introspection by focusing on the identification of culprits. Although some of the initial grief and anger seems to abide among Canadians, the question of what this will mean for the future is draining away into conversations about appropriate days of observance, if the Pope will visit, and more talk about finally granting Indigenous communities the right to drink clean water.

I do not think the voices of the children will let this land get away with this. Canada is called to much more than finding who to blame and how to honour the dead. To avoid the transformation of repentance and its call to new life is a desecration. The only future worthy of fullness of life and purpose is a future that fully examines what these things mean and fully receives their moral

remedy. Within a path of humility, honesty and moral resolve, the evils represented in these crimes against children must die in an opposite way of life. There will be a new identity for this land, a land touched by the voices of the children and lifted by the hand of God to a discipleship of justice and compassion.

It is the task of the churches to follow Jesus into this identity and future. The churches have lost the capacity to moralize to others about the behaviour that is required. They must plunge into the death of Jesus on the Cross so that the life of Jesus may be seen in a compelling goodness. The joy of this life is so much greater than the pain that now confronts us. It is the only way I feel we can follow. It is the only path that Indigenous and non-Indigenous can walk together. It is a life that promises such joy and goodness to our children. May God grant us the grace to walk together on this path. ■

Archbishop Mark MacDonald is national Indigenous archbishop of the Anglican Church of Canada.

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ART DIRECTOR: Saskia Rowley
STAFF WRITER: Matt Gardner
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 Editor: editor@anglicanjournal.com
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LONG-TERM CARE ▶

'Willful ignorance'

Why did Canada's long-term care system fail so many during the pandemic?



PHOTO: VINTAGEPIX/SHUTTERSTOCK AND P. PARKER DAILY BUGLE



▲ “The original sin was not to include long-term care in Canada’s Health Act,” says the Rev. David Pfrimmer.

PHOTO: MARTIN LUTHER UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Continued from p. 1

global standards. By February 15, 2021, it was 69 per cent—still much higher than the international average of 41 per cent, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

A May 2020 report detailing what the army found spread shock and outrage across Canada: untrained and insufficient staffing, poor virus prevention and management practices, and, in some cases, extreme neglect and a lack of basic sanitation and hygiene—resulting in, as summarized in one CBC story, “cockroaches, rotten food, patients with ulcers left bed-bound, staff moving from unit to unit wearing contaminated gear.”

To many Canadians, it seemed the pandemic had proven the long-term care system in Canada was broken. But exactly how to fix it seemed a more difficult question. In late September, as this article was being prepared for publication, Canada had just seen a federal election campaign in which major parties had proposed solutions ranging from abolishing for-profit care (the NDP) to offering tax credits to people who take care of their elderly relatives at home (Conservatives and Liberals), among other measures. The Trudeau government was re-elected on a platform that included \$9 billion in spending on long-term care over five years, as well as a plan for a national standard for long-term care.

Some Canadian Anglicans and other Christians whose work has connected them in one way or another to the pandemic or long-term care have a similar range of views on fixing the system. But they also wonder whether the questions Canadians have been asking about it run deep enough.

The Rev. Michael Garner is associate incumbent of St. Thomas the Apostle, Ottawa. Previously an infectious disease epidemiologist at the Public Health Agency of Canada, Garner has advised the church on its response to COVID-19 during the pandemic. He says the virus has raised uncomfortable questions about apathy and denial in Canadian society as it has made its way through the long-term care system.

“The pandemic has exposed our lack of care, to be quite honest,” he says. “It’s exposed something that was there, and that if we really thought about it, we probably knew was there all the time but perhaps were willfully ignorant of.”

Garner says when he used to make pastoral visits to long-term care homes, he would reassure himself that the

“We set up a system where a disease could rip through these long-term care facilities.... I think it should challenge the way we see what our society values.”

—The Rev. Michael Garner

government was keeping watch over them. But the comfort he took from that, he now says, was misguided. “Even when they were beautiful, spiritual visits,” he says, “there was this overarching oppressiveness of these places. And the way I got myself off the hook was, ‘Well they’re regulated. And it must be okay because these places are regulated.’ And that, to me, is an indictment of me.”

Many argue that government oversight has been lacking. And according to a Dec. 20, 2020 report released by Ontario’s own Long-Term Care COVID-19 Commission, the province proactively inspected fewer than two per cent of its 626 long-term care homes from March 1 to October 15 of that year.

The Rev. David Pfrimmer, professor emeritus at Martin Luther University College’s Centre for Public Ethics and a Lutheran pastor, agrees that a “willful ignorance” in Canada of the plight of the old and vulnerable has had terrible consequences.

“Ignoring the elderly has gone on for many years,” he says. “Underfunding long-term care has been a long-term problem.”

Pfrimmer was part of the Ecumenical Health Care Network, a now-defunct advocacy group of the Canadian Council of Churches, in the early 2000s during the Romanow Commission hearings on health care in Canada.

“The original sin was not to include long-term care in Canada’s Health Act,” he says.

Pfrimmer argues for a return to the idea of the public good, saying that most Canadians are willing to pay more taxes for better health care—and to more creative thinking about economics and care. He says the pandemic highlighted inequities that have been in place for decades, and “shone a light on the assumptions of how we organize our world.”

“We keep hearing we can’t afford things. But we can’t afford business as we’ve had it in the past,” he says. “People are saying, look, the pandemic has shown the flaws of the system. We have to fix the environment, the economy, and the health-care system, so we can safeguard the health and well-being of the vulnerable.”

Four of the five Ontario homes described in the military’s report were privately owned, and Pfrimmer believes moving away from privatization is a good place to start.

“We think of COVID as the great revealer—it revealed that for-profit long-term care outside of the Canada Health

Act has been a death sentence to so many elderly and senior people in Ontario,” he says, noting that dividends continued to be paid to shareholders while standards of care were all but ignored.

There are 2,039 long-term care homes—facilities that provide 24-hour care—in Canada. Of those, 54 per cent are privately owned, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

Acknowledging that a private system isn’t perfect, Garner is wary of abolishing it completely. “The scope of the problem is so massive—but then if we leave it to the government, I’m not sure that they’re the people who should be trusted to do the sort of reform that’s necessary,” he says. “If the public system was this well-oiled, functioning machine, I think it would be easier to make an argument [for abolishing private care]. I think the public system needs to be reformed, and maybe until it can demonstrate that it’s functioning, I’m not sure that I would say that everything needs to be publicly administered.”

Taking care of those in need of long-term care, he says, is “a strangely demanding job, emotionally, and I’m not sure that we’re providing all the supports.” Having part-time, ill-equipped staff working in multiple homes was a huge part of the problem during the pandemic, he adds. “We set up a system where a disease could rip through those long-term care facilities. But it’s this job and this caring that we don’t really want to do. So we outsource it—to the lowest-cost way, too often. I think it should challenge the way we see what our society values.”

In April 2021, an independent commission released its report on the pandemic and long-term care homes in Ontario, saying decades of neglect by successive governments had left the province’s system unprepared.

The pandemic has spurred provincial governments to pledge billions to improve conditions at long-term care homes. According to Ontario’s ministry of long-term care, the province has spent, or is committed to spending in coming years, \$9.6 billion on long-term care in response to the pandemic—money intended to, among other things, increase the number of daily hours of care per resident, create new long-term care spaces and make it easier for seniors to remain at home. ■

In our December issue: Does the problem go beyond dollars and cents? The second and final part of this series will look at faith, society and long-term care.

—with files by Tali Folkins

Anglicans worldwide call for equal access to COVID-19 vaccinations

Matt Gardner
STAFF WRITER

Two Anglican Communion groups are adding their voices to demands that the world's wealthy nations share their COVID-19 vaccines.

On Sept. 18, the Anglican Health and Community Network (AHCN) and Anglican Alliance called for an emergency meeting of the G7 countries to address "hoarding and wastage" of vaccines.

"Globally, over 5.5 billion vaccine doses have now been administered, but 80 per cent have been administered in

high-and upper-middle income countries. Meanwhile, Africa's vaccination coverage is at 2 per cent," the two groups said in a news release.

Formed in April, the AHCN supports Anglicans around the world who work in health care. The Anglican Alliance helps coordinate Anglican churches and agencies to fight poverty and injustice.

Also in April, Archbishop Linda Nicholls, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, joined nearly 150 religious leaders around the world in signing an open letter that called for equal global

access to COVID-19 vaccines.

The letter urged governments, civil society and the private sector to "massively ramp up vaccine production" to ensure sufficient doses for every person in the world to be vaccinated. The primate cited the Great Commandment, in which Jesus commands his followers to "love your neighbour as yourself", for her decision to sign the letter.

"If we want to be vaccinated and have easy access then we have a responsibility to desire that for our neighbours—both those close by in Canada who struggle for access

and those around the globe," Nicholls told the *Anglican Journal*.

She also highlighted the interconnected nature of countries around the world in protecting public health.

Meanwhile, the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund (PWRDF) announced in April the launch of its Vaccine Equity Fund, intended to contribute to the global vaccination effort. Donations to the fund go to support PWRDF's partners as they vaccinate people in some of the world's most vaccine-poor countries. ■

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— MATTHEW 25:40

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- 01 Malachi 3:1-12
- 02 Philippians 1:1-11
- 03 Philippians 1:12-30
- 04 Philippians 2:1-30
- 05 Luke 3:1-20
- 06 Zephaniah 3:6-20
- 07 Isaiah 12:1-6
- 08 Philippians 3:1-16
- 09 Philippians 3:17-4:3
- 10 Philippians 4:4-23
- 11 Ephesians 6:1-23
- 12 Luke 7:18-35
- 13 Micah 1:1-16
- 14 Micah 2:1-13
- 15 Micah 3:1-12

DAY READING

- 16 Micah 5:2-15
- 17 Micah 6:1-16
- 18 Micah 7:1-20
- 19 Ezra 1:1-2:1
- 20 Titus 1:1-16
- 21 Titus 2:1-15
- 22 Titus 3:1-15
- 23 Psalm 101
- 24 Luke 2:1-20
- 25 John 1:1-14
- 26 Acts 6:1-15
- 27 Psalm 116
- 28 Isaiah 63:15-64:12
- 29 1 Chr. 29:10-20
- 30 Judges 5:1-18
- 31 John 13:31-35

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