



**6 The Call of
Ordinary Time**

8 Portraits

**13 Honouring Your
Authentic Self**

15 Reframing Human

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[Rupert's Land News](#) is published 10 times per year (September - June) by the Diocese of Rupert's Land, in the Anglican Church in Canada. It connects churches and communities from Portage la Prairie, MB, to Atikokan, ON, by offering news, events, opinion, and ideas to 6,000 readers per month. RLN is available in a variety of formats:

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RLN exists to explore issues at the intersections of faith and life. In doing so we solicit and publish a range of opinions, not all of which reflect the official positions of the Diocese.

We acknowledge that we meet and work in Treaty 1 Land, the traditional land of the Anishinaabe, Cree, and Dakota people and the homeland of the Metis Nation. We are grateful for their stewardship of this land and their hospitality which allows us to live, work, and serve God the Creator here.

RLN welcomes story ideas, news items, and other input. If you want to be involved in this media ministry, please [email the editor](#).

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At this time of year, conversations around the proverbial water-cooler usually lean towards what we did over the summer. We go back to work or back to school, where we catch up with colleagues and friends, and inevitably start talking about our vacations and campsites, whether or not we spent time on the water, or if we attended any festivals. I myself spent a few weekends at the cabin and took my two-year-old to the beach for the first time (turns out, she adores it, unlike me, who would rather go hiking or curl up on the couch with a good book).

The key phrase there is “back to work.” Retail stores everywhere mark their wares as “Essential items for the office,” or offer deals on back-to-school items. In the seasonal thinking of our culture, we’ve had a break, relaxed a bit, and now it’s time to work hard again.

With a mentality like that, it’s hard to remember that the work never really stops. Even when we have the opportunity to take some time off from our occupations, the work of supporting our communities, building relationships, and taking care of our families doesn’t end.

In this issue of *Rupert’s Land News*, we explore the work of the Church: Bishop Don explores the idea of *telos* and the Church’s ultimate purpose, Jamie Howison writes about the liturgical season of Ordinary Time, and Kurt Armstrong offers a non-fiction essay about the time he worked for a photo store. We’ll also introduce you to Theo Robinson, a transgender, theological student at St. Luke’s. And, in via media, Jane Barter offers insights into the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

You might also notice something different about the look of this issue. After three years of the same format, designer Mike Berg and I decided it was time to refresh *Rupert’s Land News’s* design. What do you think of the new look? Let me know by sending an email to rlnews@rupertsland.ca. I’d love to hear from you!



Kyla Neufeld is the editor of *Rupert’s Land News*.

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3



The Church of 'the Work'

DONALD PHILLIPS

Photo: Christopher Burns

Wait a minute! Isn't there something wrong with this title? Shouldn't it read, "The work of the Church?"

For many people, churches are special interest groups for those who want to have religious expression in their lives. Some others view churches as additional community resources that provide emotional and psychological support to those in need. And, some people are more likely to engage with churches that identify with social justice or environmental concerns because they see the work and positive contributions made to the local or global community. So it is conceivable to speak of "the work of the Church."

Those who accept the Bible as authoritative often point to verses like Matthew 28:16 ("Go and make disciples of all nations...") to claim that the primary work of the Church is to make everyone a disciple of Jesus Christ. But that is only one passage of many in the New Testament that addresses the purpose of Christianity. It is true that the story of the early Church portrayed in the Book of Acts does record the tremendous

growth of the Church. But, throughout the New Testament, the numeric growth of the Church is always viewed as a sign of the power of the Holy Spirit at work through the lives of believers, not a record of "effective church growth."

What is the Church "for?" Do local churches, and the universal Church they represent, have a purpose – and particularly an ultimate purpose in God's will for the world?

Philosophical writings attribute "ultimate purposes" to the field of teleology. What is the telos or ultimate purpose of the Church? Is there some greater "work" that is actually the reason the Church exists? Do we really have a "Church of the work?"

Yes! In the introduction to the Letter to the Ephesians we read, "with all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will... as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:8b–10). While the passage doesn't explain how God intends to do this, it does go on to say that those who are "in Christ" have "obtained an inheritance,

having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will” (Ephesians 1:11). Though sketchy on details, this passage is clear that those who are in Christ (i.e. the Church) have a role in God’s purpose for the world.

In many places in the New Testament letters, those who are in Christ are called to be witnesses, both collectively and individually, to the reality of the risen Christ bringing about God’s reign on earth. We don’t know exactly how God will accomplish this, but the New Testament does explain that we, the members of the Church, are to order our lives so that God is able to work through us. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the author passionately prays for the Church members: “I pray that... God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:16, 17).

He expands on the nature and inner workings of the Church in the next chapter, using the metaphor of a human body – explaining the various gifts with which the Holy Spirit equips members of the Church in order to do this work. Even the relationships and interactions between members of the Church play a role in accomplishing this: “But speaking the truth in love,



Photo: Roman Kraft

we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15, 16). Through the members of the Church and the way in which they live their lives, God both reveals God’s ultimate purpose (establishing the reign of God on earth) and begins to show what that looks like, even in a partial and imperfect way.

So, the Church was created for “the work” – God’s work. This includes our employment, our volunteer work, and our relationships with our family and community. Everything that the members of the Church are, and do, collectively and individually in their lives, is part of that work. Every local congregation is called and gifted to carry out that work. And every Christian, by definition, is called to be part of that Church – the Church of God’s work.



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Donald Phillips,
Bishop of Rupert’s Land

The Call of Ordinary Time

JAMIE HOWISON



I'm sure that, at some point, many parishes had one of those "liturgical year" posters hanging in the parish hall or Sunday School area. Sometimes they're set out in a long line, beginning with Advent and ending with the Reign of Christ, but most often they are pie-charts that show how the old year rolls right into the new. There are decent slices of blue and purple for Advent and Lent, a smaller white one for Christmastide and a good sized slice of white for Eastertide, a few splashes of red for Holy Week and Pentecost, and a then a whole lot of green. The first green slice for the period between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday is modest, but that second one? It is good for about half the pie.

The Revised Common Lectionary counts off this long, green season as Sundays after Pentecost, which – when you think about it – is a rather unremarkable way to mark a season. We've had the grand bang of Pentecost to cap off the glorious Easter season, and now we're just counting off the weeks as they pass by. At least the *Book of Common Prayer* calendar numbered them as Sundays in Trinity!

The other name for this season is Ordinary Time, which I believe has the potential to alert us to something deeper and richer. But that sounds so *ordinary*, you might respond. Where is the richness in that?

It comes in remembering that, while we might love the celebrations of Christmas and

Easter, and though we might be spiritually nourished by the reflective themes of Advent and Lent, much of our time is spent in the ordinary day-to-day things of life. "Let us remember," wrote Gregory of Nyssa in his treatise *On the Lord's Prayer*, "that the life in which we ought to be interested is 'daily' life [for] we can, each of us, only call the present time our own."

Daily life, of course, brings with it those things that need to be done. There are meals to be prepared, floors to be mopped, errands to be run, and appointments to be kept. How often do we ask someone the question, "What's new?" only to be told "nothing much," "same old, same old," or even – to borrow a line from an old song by Tennessee Ernie Ford – "just another day older and deeper in debt." Part of the gift of Ordinary Time is that it invites us beyond the sense of drudgery and opens us to seeing the Holy in the most ordinary of things.

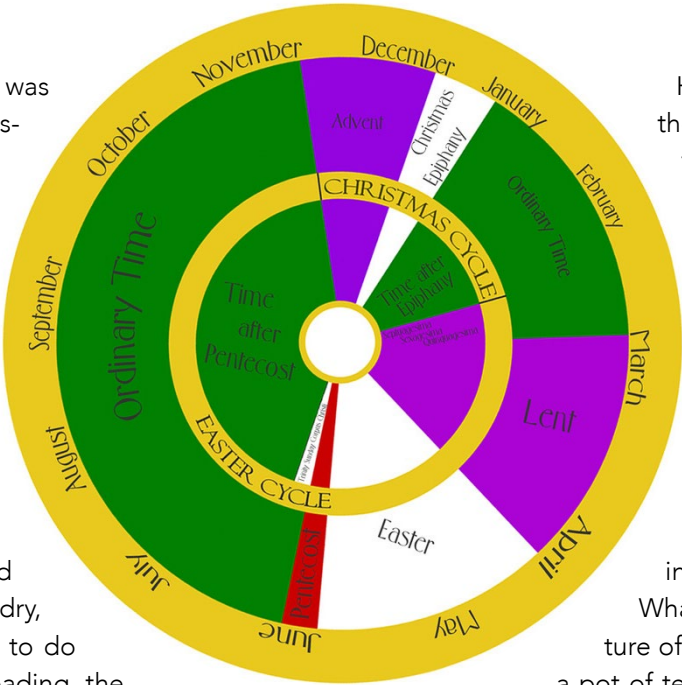
In her little book *The Quotidian Mysteries*, Kathleen Norris writes of her first time experiencing a Roman Catholic liturgy. It was a wedding mass, and she, a very nominal Presbyterian, found herself a bit lost trying to follow the liturgy. There was, though, a moment when things finally had meaning for her, when the priest stood at the altar doing the ablutions. "Look at that!" she'd said to her husband. "The priest is cleaning up! He's doing the dishes!"



I found it remarkable –and still find it remarkable – that in that big, fancy church, after all of the dress-up and the formalities of the wedding mass, homage was being paid to the lowly truth that we human beings must wash the dishes after we eat and drink. The chalice, which had held the very blood of Christ, was no exception. I found it enormously comforting to see the priest as a kind of daft housewife, overdressed for the kitchen, in bulky robes, puttering about the altar, washing up after having served so great a meal to so many people. It brought the mass home to me and gave it meaning.

For Norris, it was seeing this very domestic act happen in the midst of a most holy liturgy that connected things for her; for others, it will be recognizing that holy things can be encountered in the midst of our domestic and ordinary lives.

I have a friend who loves to do laundry, because it takes time to do the sorting and the loading, the drying and the ironing and the folding. What begins with a pile of clothes on the floor ends with an empty laundry hamper and clean, fresh clothes and sheets. As she describes it, it is all but contemplative in the way it settles and calms her. And why should we imagine that the Spirit of God would be absent from such things? After all, just look at how much attention is paid to pots and pans and washing up in the Hebrew Scriptures.



How often are the best conversations shared over a meal you've prepared for friends? How often are stories told and laughter shared as the dishes are washed, dried, and stacked back in the cupboard?

What a simple gesture of love it is to make a pot of tea for a partner at the end of a Saturday afternoon of chores and errands, or to bring them a cold drink while they're out working in the garden. These aren't complicated things, but they can very much be holy things: holy and ordinary, both.

This is the season when we work our way slowly through all of those gospel stories that come between the birth narratives and the Passion. We hear Jesus' teaching, we watch him offer healing and restoration, we listen to his parables... and again and again we watch as he sits down for meals, whether with 5,000 on a hillside or alone in the home of Zacchaeus. Pay attention to how often the stories involve meals, food, drink, and then ask if there is any moment, any time or place, any season too ordinary for God. No? Then our stock answers to that question "What's new?" probably need to be reconsidered, don't they? That's the call of Ordinary time.



Jamie Howison is the founding pastoral leader of saint benedict's table. He recently contributed a chapter on Winnipeg to *The Soul of the City: Mapping the Spiritual Geography of Eleven Canadian Cities*, published by Urban Loft Publishers.



As I begin my 33rd year in funeral service, I am operating on my own as Richard Rosin Funeral Director Ltd.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has offered their support and encouragement during this transition.

A business launch announcement will follow next month.

I look forward to many more years of creating meaningful funeral events.

You make a difference, and have a wonderful story that I would be honoured to help share.

Peace and blessings,

Richard Rosin
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Portraits

KURT ARMSTRONG

Photo: Jeff Sheldon

In 1998, I took a physics-for-liberal-arts-majors course to fulfill the science requirement for my sociology degree, and I took a job at a photo store as manager, cashier, and portrait photographer. I'd never managed anything or worked retail before, but I'd been taking photos for years and the store was failing anyways, so they got me to shoot a roll of film of a tired-looking manager from another store and then hired me. My first portrait session was with a Danish man in his early 70s who reminded me of my grandfather. The second was with a toddler who, when I was four shots into the session, started to fill his diaper: his eyes bulged, his body tensed up, and his mom had to whisk him away for a diaper change.

In the first two months, I had dozens of portrait sittings, including a diaperless pug named Noodles that piddled all over the carpet in the portrait room, a family of more than 20 I had to shoehorn into my tiny studio, and a priest with a long black pony tail.

One afternoon, the whole sales team from a nearby car dealership, whose earlier sitting had turned out poorly, came back for retakes: A bunch of pissed-off middle-aged men with sports coats and moustaches; smelling of coffee, cigarettes, peppermints, and various colognes; all dudes, who seemed to take their masculinity very, very seriously; and all of them scowling at me. I led them into the back portrait

room, and as they passed by, one of them muttered, "You'd better not muck this up again."

I wanted to say, "I wasn't the one who mucked it up the first time; and honestly, buddy, there's really guarantee, what with a face like yours," but I didn't. I didn't say anything at all because 1) the truth is, I couldn't promise him I wouldn't muck it up again, and 2) I was thoroughly intimidated, which is exactly what the mustachioed bully wanted.

In November after daylight savings time was over and I was two minutes from closing up for the afternoon, a man with a huge face came in, asking if I had a couple dollars I could spare so he could buy a cup of coffee. It looked like he had been spilling dribbles of coffee down

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the front of his beige winter coat for years, the stubble around his mouth was crusty with what looked like old soup, and he had drips hanging off the tip of his nose and a Winnipeg Jets toque pulled down over his ears. I gave him a dollar and he scowled. "That all you got?" he said.

"That's it," I said.

"Okay, thanks."

Three days later, 10 minutes before closing, he came in and joined the line of four other people waiting to pick up their photos. When it was his turn, he said, "Could you spare a couple of dollars for a coffee?" I gave him another dollar. When he came back again the next day and asked for another couple dollars, I said, "I don't have any change on me today, but if you come back tomorrow you can sit on that chair by my desk and I'll make you a cup of coffee. How does that sound?"

"Okay, sure," he said. I closed the store and bought a kettle and two mugs at the thrift store on the way home. I bought a big jar of no-name instant coffee – the cheapest and least interesting source of caffeine money can buy – a tin of coffee whitener, and a box of sugar cubes. I didn't see him again until Tuesday of the following week when he stopped in just after lunch, the quietest time of day on the slowest day of the week. "Have you got a couple dollars so I can get a cup of coffee?" he asked.

"No, but I can make a cup for you right here," I said. "Take a seat over by the desk." He sat on the edge of the chair and unzipped his coat and I filled up the kettle and plugged it in.

"I still don't know your name," I said. "I'm Kurt."
"I'm Larry."

There were two saving graces in this boring-as-hell job. 1) Almost nobody ever came in. The store sold out-of-date photofinishing – three days to get your prints instead of one hour – and junky retail items like key chains and flimsy plastic photo books with yellowing transparent pages. Digital photography was showing early signs of ascendancy. But long, slow stretches in my day gave me countless hours to read without ever actually shirking on my work. And 2) there was an old wooden stereo cabinet in the corner that played records.

When the kettle boiled, I mixed a coffee for each of us and asked Larry if he'd like to listen to a record.

"Whatcha got?" he asked.

I pulled out a small stack of some of my favourites, some brand new albums, and some treasures I found amongst the thousands of used records in the "vinyl dungeon" at the record store. *Eye In The Sky* by Alan Parsons Project? "Nope." *Trans-Europe Express* by Kraftwerk? "Nope." *Terraform* by Shellac? "Nope." 1965 by Afghan Whigs? He shook his head. "Oh no. No, no, no. No, not that. Have you got any Jan and Dean?"

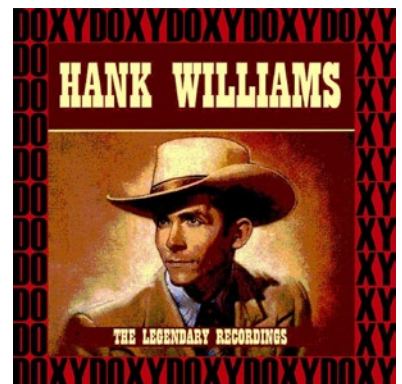
"Sorry, Larry, I don't even know who that is."

"How about Nestor Pistor?"

"I don't even know what you're saying. Is that a band?"

"No Nestor Pistor then. How about Beach Boys?"

"I know who the Beach Boys are, but I don't



have any of their records.”

“How about Engelbert Humperdinck?”

“I wish I did because I can tell by his name that he would be amazing.” I flipped through my small stack. “What about this?” I held up a Hank Williams compilation, *The Lonesome Legend*. He squinted at the cover and scowled.

“Lemme see,” he said. I handed it across the desk and he scowled at the sleeve a bit more, flipped it back and forth a few times, and said, “Okay.” He sat back in his chair, pulled off his coat, and took a big noisy slurp of coffee. “Ow,” he said, wincing. “That’s hot.”

I put the record on the turntable, found “Your Cheatin’ Heart,” and turned it up loud enough for the music to fill the store. Larry put his coffee cup back on the desk and started to rock in his chair, stomping his foot, and slapping his thigh in a heartfelt approximation of rhythm.

“That’s a good song,” he said.

“So you like Hank Williams then?” I asked.

“Of course.”

When the song was over I turned down the volume. Larry took a couple more noisy, wincing slurps of coffee, and, when half of it was gone, he stood up and put on his coat and said,

“Okay, I’m gonna go now. Could you spare a couple dollars?”

“No, I can’t, Larry, but if you want you can come back tomorrow and I can make you a coffee again.”

“Okay then,” he said.

Larry never bought a single thing from the store. I’m not certain he even knew it was a



Photo: Pierre Guï

photography store. But he was my most regular and favourite customer. In the New Year, he would come by once or twice a week, and if other customers were there, I’d invite him to go sit at the chair by my desk. If the line up kept growing and I couldn’t get to him in time, he’d get impatient and leave, but he always came back a day or two later. When I had time to sit and make coffee, we would talk about music and records, and he’d scowl at nearly everything I offered to play for him.

Six months after I quit, a bridal shop took over the space, and three years later there was a fire in the building and now there’s a snowboard shop in the space.

But, before I left, I got Larry to sit for a portrait session, big coat and toque and all. He winced and blinked dramatically every time the big flashes fired, but I got a few decent shots before he had to go. I told him “Smile, Larry,” and he tried to and actually looked pretty natural. I saved a handful of the portraits from my time working there, and the few that I took of him are my favourites.



Kurt Armstrong is a lay minister at St. Margaret’s Anglican, and part-time handyman. This essay is from his book-in-progress, *Work And Love Will Make A Man Out Of You*.


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Parish News Round Up



Anglican Grow Hope

Fifteen acres of hard red spring wheat for Anglican Grow Hope were harvested on August 16, 2018. You can check out a video of the harvest at [PWRDF's Rupert's Land Face-book page](#).

And, mark your calendars! There will also be a harvest celebration on September 23. We'll have the details up on RLN's Events page when they become available.

Neighbours: Grace Lutheran Church

Syrian Refugee family settle into their new home

On June 14, the family that Grace Lutheran Church sponsored arrived in Winnipeg. The reunion included 12 members of the family, members of Grace's refugee committee, and Jim Mair from NEST (North End Sponsorship Team). The long-awaited reunion was two years in the making.

Once the congregation made the decision to sponsor, they donated more than enough to furnish their apartment, and raised over 20,000 to help the family make Winnipeg their new home.

Grace worked with eldest brother Ahmad (stripped shirt in the photo), who helped with some of the application process and acted as a resource for the committee and his brother. The whole process, from application to arrival and moving in was quite smooth, due to the support of so many people – in particular Abdelraheem's wonderful family.



Abdelraheem Khatab (far left in the picture), wife Groub (far right), and daughter Fatima (behind her cousin in the red jacket) moved into their apartment on July 6, right across the hall from brother Hassan and his family.

There are now five brothers and their families, one sister, their parents, and grandfather in Winnipeg.

Remaining in Jordan are two sisters, both married and one with a young son and daughter.

If any congregations are interested in sponsoring either of the sisters, please contact Richard Rosin at Grace Lutheran for information: 204-661-2562.

– Richard Rosin



This page of the Parish News Round Up is sponsored by Richard Rosin. For more information, see his ad on page 7.

Saints’ Stories: Thelma Olive Lillie

The following is an excerpt from the eulogy given at Elder Olive Lillie’s funeral service at St. Peter’s, Dynevor. She passed away July 7, 2018.

One wonders what her secret was. How she could raise eleven children – at times under very difficult conditions –and welcome foster children and grandchildren and great-great grandchildren and how there was always more than enough room and more than enough – enough bannock, enough jam, enough tea, enough little bologna treats for four-legged friends, enough laughter, and more than enough love for everyone.

It would be wrong for us to think that such love that Olive displayed was without its challenges. She and her family faced the kinds of burdens and difficulties that we are only now beginning to understand. She was born and raised in this place just a generation after the forced dissolution of this community. Her parents would have lost most of their natural kinship ties and supports. When she was a young mother, she had to fight to keep her eldest children from taken during the Sixties’ Scoop.

And so throughout her life she worked toward and embodied that painstaking travail that is reconciliation. Long before we had national commissions or apologies, Olive Lillie showed us a path toward the friendship and love that can exist between settlers and Indigenous people. Not through forgetting the past, but through the long and difficult work of remembering the injustices that her people faced and through fighting fiercely against them.

And so one wonders what her secret was. How she could love so fully and so well, and forgive so freely? How was it that, even under some of life’s most difficult circumstances, she could always find goodness, hope and humour? I believe that her faith in God was no small part of it. It was a faith that was nourished within these very four walls where her

father served as minister.

And it was this faith in God that provided the source and the strength and the power to nurture and to welcome and to offer reconciliation in the way that she did. My students often ask me (increasingly incredulously each year) how I can possibly be a Christian. By this I think they mean, how can I believe in such strange ideas, but even more so how can I belong to a church that has done so much damage in the world? And to this, the only reasonable explanation that I can give for faith is that in the church I have met some of this most incredible, and the most beautiful, and the most gentle people that one could ask for or imagine. I count Olive Lillie as foremost among these saints.

– Jane Barter

Upcoming Issues

In **October** we’ll be taking a look at the Canadian Criminal Justice system and how the Church can support those in prison.

In **November** we’ll follow up with an issue on Restorative Justice.

And **December’s** issue explores Sacred Space.

Anglican Journal Appeal

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or go online to canadahelps.org and make your gift today.

Honouring Your Authentic Self

CASS SMITH



Photo: Theo Robinson

I would like to introduce you to Theo Robinson, a theological student who has been training to be a minister at St. Luke's for the 2017–2018 academic year. Though I have always known him to be authentic and sincere, when I met him back in 2011, things were quite different. Most notably, Theo was going by his birth name: Theresa Jennifer Robinson. He was also facing several losses, including that of a child in pregnancy, his marriage, which had been an integral part of his identity for over a decade, and his sense of self. A newly single parent living at his mom's, he was reserved, shy, and grieving. And, he was about to begin a journey of self-discovery which would change not only his career path but also his whole world.

Though an accountant by trade, Theo felt unhappy in his career and where he felt his heart was calling him. Through prayer and contemplation, he rediscovered his relationship with God and knew in his heart that the Church was the place where he was meant to be. However, the path to completing this journey was anything but simple.

As many know, the history of the Church's relationship with the LGBTQ2A community has not always been the best. This was Theo's biggest struggle in accepting his calling from God as, at the time, there were few openly accepting

and affirming churches. The Anglican Church of Canada allows individual churches to make the decisions best fitting their congregations, and has seen divisions in congregations and churches as a result. In initial conversations regarding Theo's postulant and, eventually, ministry placements, it was a concern that was raised more than once. Fortunately, both the Diocese of Rupert's Land and Bishop Don Phillips have been incredibly supportive in this journey.

In spring 2017, Theo realized that there was a part of himself to which he was not being true: Not something missing, but an integral part of himself that he was too afraid to acknowledge or accept. With much reflection, soul searching, and prayer he came to the understanding that he was a transgender man.

This is the biggest conflict I've ever seen him work through. He struggled during this time, wondering if he would be accepted by his family and friends and worrying about his profession standing in the Church. After several years of university studies, hard work, and dedication, would it all be taken away because he was "different" again? Was it worth coming out? Theo was yet again faced with a difficult decision: should he come out and accept the risk of possibly losing his path to ministry? Or should he continue to hide himself away and

just keep his head down to simply get by?

Over the last few months, Theo has rededicated himself to his studies and his pursuit of ministry. He has had many difficult conversations, including seeking out the support of Bishop Don and (much to Theo's surprise) receiving it wholeheartedly. In that discussion, Theo discovered that, to Bishop Don's knowledge he is the first openly transgender individual who has sought ordination in the Diocese of Rupert's Land and possibly the whole Anglican Church of Canada. He has been blessed with the chance to make a difference for not only himself and the church, and to be a part of healing the relationship between the Church and the LGBTQ2A community as a whole.

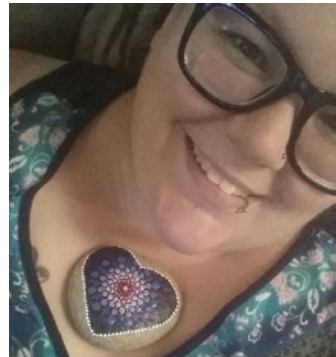
I have seen extraordinary growth from Theo in the five years leading up to his transition, and in the one year since his transition began. His confidence has grown, and he is not afraid



Photo: Theo Robinson

to speak up, to share his life and his story with those he meets. Theo has become a trailblazer for transgender individuals within the Diocese of Rupert's Land and even possibly the Anglican Church of Canada – for transgender parishioners and ministers who have been too afraid or are unable to speak their truth. Gone are the days when being transgender *and* Christian was unheard of. The church is built on the love and acceptance of all God's children. "All are Welcome" is no longer just a slogan on a billboard, but instead the way we love and the way we live our lives.

This article was adapted from a newsletter for St. Luke's Anglican.



Cass Smith is a Winnipeg-based, peace-loving hippy. She and Theo have two little monsters (ages 9 & 7). When she isn't working, you can find her chauffeuring kids to activities, cheering at her kids football and rugby games, or elbow deep in her current craft project.

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Reframing Human

JANE BARTER

This is a short excerpt from a book that I am currently writing on the theological and political significance of witnessing to atrocity. The book is a theological dialogue with Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, on the nature of remembering as a political and theological task.

Photo: Erica Magughani

In his unforgettable *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben reflects upon the figures of the so-called *Muselmänner*, the name given to those prisoners so ill and malnourished that they hovered between life and death. The *Muselmänner*, according to Agamben, compel us to rethink the human fundamentally, and if we are to rethink the human, we must also rethink those categories that we habitually engage to distinguish human and non-human life.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben draws his account of the *Muselmänner* from Primo Levi, the Italian chemist, writer and survivor of Auschwitz:

In these paragraphs Levi systematically deconstructs all cherished notions of what constitutes the human. There is no unique identity or personality; there is no speech (so often identified in the Western tradition with human uniqueness). Theirs is a faceless presence; there is no thought; they are even deprived of the dignity of death; they have no divine spark within them.

Thus not only does the *Muselmänn* come to represent the caesura between life and death, but also between human and non-human. Stripped of speech and dignity, the *Muselmänn* is denied even those seemingly self-evident

“All the *Muselmänner* who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly they have no story; they have followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea.... Their life is short, but their number is endless; they the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them.... One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death...



Giorgio Agamben

qualities by which we distinguish human and non-human life and by which we offer ethical protection.

Agamben wants to explore what takes place when humans are stripped of their humanity. This is not because of a moral failure on the part of the Muselmänner; rather, their lack of humanity is produced through a separation that is extrinsic to them. They are produced as non-human by sovereign power – the very power that the Nazis wielded to separate Jew from non-Jew: those destined for the gas chambers, and those destined for a few more weeks of life, and, among the latter, those who will would toil and survive, and the Muselmänner – those whose life is a living death.

Thus Auschwitz creates a new human, who is “non-human,” and yet such power is not singular. It is replicated in all those places where forces over life and death subject the human creature to increasing political control while simultaneously stripping them of any course for redress. We need simply think of the growing masses of refugees whose very survival depends upon the sovereign choice of nation states to grant asylum, which is increasingly denied.

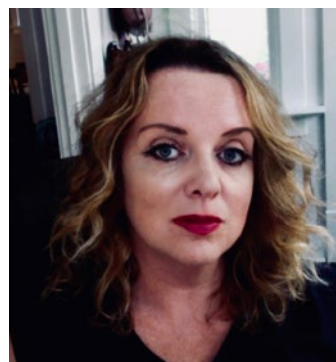
Having challenged conceptions of human

u n i q u e n e s s Agamben asks us to consider an alternative account of humanity – one that is characterized not by dignity, but by shame. Agamben here is not talking about an intrinsic psychological experience, but rather a fundamentally constructed phenomenon that is a feature of

contemporary political life now inscribed upon the experiences of men and women. Agamben cites Robert Antelme’s story of the death marches of the prisoners at the end of the War, in which a young man is summoned by an SS guard to step from the line. The young man’s immediate response is to blush. Why does he blush? Certainly he had already been subjected to the most humiliating of experiences. And yet he blushes because he feels shame before the guard. According to Agamben, “That flush is like a mute apostrophe flying through time to reach us, to bear witness to him.”

What we bear witness to is not the student’s courage, because he was not courageous; no one could be in those circumstances. It is also not to his survival, for he did not survive. We must bear witness instead to shame, a shame that is at the heart of the human experience, not ontologically so, but as a result of the extremity of contemporary political forces that conspire to reduce a young student to one who is compelled to apologize for his death before his executioner.

But just so, Agamben offers us a glimpse of hope. To witness to that flush – “that mute witness flying through time” – is to be compelled to cry out on behalf of those who cannot. As Agamben puts it, “The human being is the one who can survive the human being.” This is not to say that the human being is the one who survives Auschwitz or any other atrocity; but rather, it is to say that the human being is the one who survives being consigned to humanity or inhumanity by sovereign power. To witness to the human is to resist the demarcation of human from inhuman. To witness to the human is to dare to attend to (in)human cries of the shamed.



Jane Barter is a priest in the Diocese of Rupert's Land, who is currently serving St. Peter, Dynevor and St. Bartholomew parishes. She is also Professor of Religion and Culture at The University of Winnipeg.



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