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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, 2, and 3 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.

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## What do Difficult Psalms Say to Us?

Image: [Geordanna Cordero](#)

The full title of this issue is “Psalms that Suck: Grappling with Difficult Scripture,” and I hope you’ll take it with the humour with which it’s given. The Psalms are a beloved book of the Bible and an important part of our worship expression. But, as the articles in this issue will attest, there are certain psalms we’d rather skip when they come up in the lectionary. I think that’s exactly why we should take a closer look at them.

Both Lissa Wray Beal and Mary Coswin tackle the imprecatory psalms, or cursing psalms. These are the psalms that ask God to strike down enemies with all manner of afflictions. How can they speak to a modern Western audience? Lissa says that they give voice to those who are in the midst of deep injustice and distress. Mary suggests that we can pray these psalms as a call to end oppression. In a world so overwrought with poverty, homelessness, migrant crises, and racism, we can see these psalms in a new light.

Songs have a way of expressing ideas and emotions in a way that other forms cannot. Songs sit in our souls. And the songs that come out of fraught circumstances are powerful. Blues music has deep roots in African musical traditions and spirituals, and started to appear with the ending of slavery in the U.S.; it is thought to be associated with the new-found

freedom of the former slaves. Protest songs have come and gone with every wave of social change, from the abolition, women’s suffrage, and anti-war movements to LGBTQ2 rights, gun control, and environmentalism. How many of us can hear Edwin Starr’s “War” without immediately singing along with “What is it good for? / Absolutely nothing”?

When I see a psalm that calls for an enemy’s children to become orphans, I start to wonder: what injustice is the speaker facing?

In this issue, we also have a piece from singer/songwriter Jaylene Johnson about how songs can act as “modern psalms.” On page 14 is a gorgeous image for Lent, and, lastly, Stuart Mann, Communications Director of the Diocese of Toronto, offers a look at the companions program offered by the Sisterhood of St. John the Divine.

Some psalms are hard to read. But, I think, when we delve into them a little deeper, we will find that they express something about the human condition we have all experienced.



Kyla Neufeld is the editor of Rupert's Land News.

# Speak Boldly, Walk Humbly

GEOFFREY WOODCROFT



*[God] has put a new song in my mouth... Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord. – Psalm 40:3, NRSV*

Why do the preaching and teaching in our current Church context sometimes fail to motivate disciples to action and evangelism? Has our practice changed so significantly that our important message is misunderstood, or, worse, mistrusted? The writer of Psalm 40 cries that they have spoken boldly of God’s salvific acts, they have not restrained their lips in the great congregation. Yet later in the psalm the writer says that they are wanted dead by others, and so they plead for God’s deliverance in light of their faithfulness.

According to preacher and teacher Lesslie Newbigin in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, anything the Church might say to the world will be first filtered through modern lenses to decipher facts and truth so the listener may make up their own mind regarding the Gospel. He suggests that, in many instances, the Church has not changed its preaching, teaching and practices, but that society in general has changed the way it hears the message. Since the enlightenment, disparity exists between proven facts, known truth(s), and belief systems.; disparity is bolstered in part by human fascination and dependence upon the sciences. Newbigin suggests that the thirst for the Gospel is just as great as it ever has been, but that the Church must learn to communicate anew.

If Newbigin is correct, and I think he is, then the voice of Psalm 40 is now haunting our preachers, teachers, and practitioners because we too think and feel that the world has been turning away from Judeo-Christian teachings. I think I have, at certain times, acted cowardly when proclaiming in the wider world, fearing rebuke and tough public questions. Thus, I have spoken with *restrained lips*. For us today to

proclaim boldly with understanding might be something for which we have not been trained and nurtured. Consequently we must learn to be more confident in the message of God’s salvific acts than we have been in past generations, by seeing those acts of God working in the world here and now as the Body of Christ is intricately and intimately woven into God’s relationship with the whole of creation. It is necessary for education, empowerment and resources to be readily available for all disciples to grow into the time we now inhabit, and that is an investment we need to make in order for Church to respond to God’s calls.

Expressing God’s love for the entirety of creation, and particularly the human family, is one of God’s saving acts with which you and I, the Body of Christ, have been empowered to enact in the world around us. The Marks of Mission and our covenant at baptism embody this *saving* by showing that the Body of Christ lives Jesus’ resurrected life, as we are the humans God created us to be. God uses every encounter we have to heal, reconcile, and make new. Our actions and words, natural and organic within our context, may be most convincing to those who rely upon factual proof that God’s kingdom is at hand. God reaches the kingdom toward new disciples when we proclaim justice, embody kindness, and walk humbly.



Geoffrey Woodcroft,  
Bishop of Rupert’s Land



## “Curse them, Lord!” – The Psalms We’d Rather Avoid

LISSA WRAY BEAL

Image: [Henrik Dønnestad](#)

The Psalter speaks to real-life situations. It encourages faith (Psalms 11, 23, 27), models praise (Psalms 29, 103), reveals wisdom (Psalms 1, 19, 119), and accompanies pilgrim people (Psalms 120–134). John Calvin’s description of the Psalter as “An Anatomy of All Parts of the Human Soul” in *Commentary on Psalms* is apt. No wonder the Psalter is a treasure in the church, synagogue, and private prayer-closet.

The Psalter speaks to life’s goodness, but it also speaks to suffering that calls forth lament. In fact, psalms of lament are the single most frequent type or genre of psalm in the Psalter. Laments name pain, petition God for release, and find their way to praise. Their inclusion in the Psalter affirms the appropriateness of such words as prayer. They also remind us – even if we are not in pain – that when we recite, pray, or read them, we stand with and give voice to the pain of those in our parish and our world.

A subcategory of laments is *imprecatory* or cursing psalms. These psalms express lament and then *petition God to curse the enemy*. They are laments on steroids. They comprise only five percent of the Psalter, and the curse may be only a verse or two within the lament psalm. For instance, petitioned curses take up six of 28 verses in Psalm 35, and eight of 11 verses in

Psalm 58, but only one verse in Psalm 137. Yet they expose the underbelly of prayer, and are so raw they shock us. In Psalm 58, a whole community asks God to break the enemy’s teeth, and wishes their enemy to be like a “like a slug that melts away... like a stillborn child” (8). The community gladly anticipates God’s vengeance so that they might “dip their feet in the blood of the wicked” (10). In another example, Psalm 137 has the exiled community in Babylon resisting their captor’s demand for a song. Instead, the exiles pledge loving remembrance of Jerusalem, and ask God to remember and repay their enemies, envisioning it a happy event when the babies of Babylon have their heads dashed against the rocks (9).

We recoil from such gruesome, graphic language as a matter of course. When it appears in inspired scripture – and within a book that provides models for prayer and praise – the recoil is greater. We generally avoid them, expunging them from our public and private prayers and readings. This is unfortunate. Imprecatory psalms need careful consideration and thoughtful use, but *because of* (not *despite*) their invocation of curses, they have a role in the life of faith. More, they are “God-breathed and... useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting

and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Imprecatory psalms bring us face-to-face with several realities. First, that life can *really* get this bad. Whether as intimate as domestic violence, or as public as the mass removal of the Kurds from their homes, people, governments, and systems are sinful and act sinfully to devastating effect. These prayers give powerful voice to those who suffer. They also call us to consider our own actions: might someone be praying these psalms *against us*? They call us to mourning, to repentance when needed, and to bring about change.

Second, these psalms reveal that God’s kingly rule is just (Psalms 97, 98). Our judgment is often faulty, but the psalmist is confident God judges rightly. Further, God’s character is to defend the poor and needy. This knowledge is the impetus for the psalmist’s complaint and imprecation. In a backhanded way, complaint and imprecation is praise. It effectively says, “You are a powerful and just God who cares; no one else can help; I’m complaining to the only one who can act rightly!”

Third, imprecatory psalms remind us of the “violence that nests in every human heart,” as Irene Nowell puts it in *Pleading, Cursing, Praising: Conversing with God through the Psalms*. Our enemies might not be those of the psalmist, but we might wish to lash out against our own enemies in similarly shocking ways. Nowell recounts a story in which a venerable Benedictine Sister objected, “I can’t say those

things in church!” Another Sister blurted out, “I don’t know why you can’t say them in church. You say them in the hall!” Yes. We all can wish terrible things against our enemies; honest acknowledgement in prayer (of what God already knows we think) is a route to removing such violence from our hearts.

Fourth, imprecatory psalms remind us that we might (in our secret hearts) *wish* bad things against our enemies, but vengeance does not belong to us. The psalmist takes seriously God’s injunction that vengeance belongs to him alone (Deuteronomy 32:35–36). The psalmist only *asks God* to bring about the petitioned curses; never does the psalmist himself or herself act out the violence. Assured that God is just, these psalms direct us to “throw the sword to God,” as Reed Lessing says in “Broken Teeth, Bloody Baths, and Baby Bashing,” published in *Concordia Journal*. We leave it with God to act rightly, whether that right action aligns with our wishes or not.

These psalms are difficult to read, laced as they are with violence. But for those in deep distress and sustained injustice, they give a powerful pastoral voice to suffering, acknowledging the precious dignity of God’s creation. For all God’s people, these cursing psalms remind us in the midst of a broken world that we long for God’s eschatological kingdom where sorrow, crying, and pain will be no more. By the values of that longed-for kingdom, we shape our own lives and action.



Lissa Wray Beal is the Professor of Old Testament, and chair of the Seminary Bible and Theology Department, at Providence Theological Seminary. An ordained Anglican priest, she also serves in an honorary capacity at the Parish of St. Peter, Winnipeg.



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# How to Approach Difficult Psalms

MARY COSWIN

Image: [Steve Johnson](#)

We love to welcome guests to our monastery chapel to join us for morning or evening prayer, which consist of reciting the psalms in choir. The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible; there is one for every occasion, emotion, question, joy, and sorrow.

Truth be told, though, there are moments when I cringe at the presence of a guest. If the guest is unfamiliar with the Psalms, I dread to think what he or she may be thinking when they hear, “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (Psalm 139:7, NRSV). I want to shout, *No, we really don’t wish that on anyone!*

There are no less than 10 other “psalms that suck.” Another name for these is “cursing psalms.” For example:

**“May his children be orphans,  
and his wife a widow.  
May his children wander about and beg;  
may they be driven out of the ruins  
they inhabit.  
May the creditor seize all that he has;  
may strangers plunder the fruits of  
his toil.  
May there be no one to do him a kindness,  
nor anyone to pity his orphaned  
children.” (Psalm 109:9–12, NRSV)**

So how do we deal with or pray psalms like the one just quoted above? Perhaps we have been numbed to some of this language because of violence in our media, movies and even news coverage. But when we place those words on our lips in a mindful way as a prayer, we have to ponder, *What am I really praying here? Is the God I believe in, know, and love, one who annihilates those who may have hurt me or others?*

I think there are four ways we can approach these psalms. Let’s start with the word *enemies* and consider the psalmist at the moment of composition. The psalmist may be feeling discouraged, victimized, hurt, or angry, and those are normal feelings. And good mental health dictates that we own our feelings. So far, so good! We can be grateful that the psalmist is not acting on those feelings. On the other hand, it is tempting for the psalmist, as it is for us at times, to make God in our own image; so the psalmist calls on the god of his imagination to wreak havoc on his enemies because god is surely on his side. We can all see the flaw in that thinking. The God of our Judeo-Christian tradition is compassionate and merciful, and we are made to live in that image.

Secondly, we can pray the psalms as prayed by Christ, with Christ, or about Christ, as

Thomas Merton suggests. In this sense, the Body of Christ is suffering enemy blows at this very moment; while I may be rejoicing, others in Christ are suffering. I can pray in the name of those members.

Another way to look at these psalms is the fact that sometimes I am my own worst enemy. Envy, pride, lust, gluttony, sloth, and ambition get the better of me and keep me from the peace and love God wants me – all of us – to have. It is then that I can truly pray that those enemies be crushed, silenced, and their “children” be dashed on the rock, which is Christ. Let Him take care of these enemies within.

Finally, the world is, as it was always, blighted by systems of corruption and oppression. As Bonheoffer once said, “The cursing psalms lead to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies... In this way the crucified Jesus teaches us to pray those psalms correctly.” These systems are true enemies of the kin-dom of God, and God must put an end to them. We rightly pray for an end to these systems. We call on God to work miracles of peace and healing and for the grace to do all we can to notice, name, and work in any way we can to eliminate the enemies of the kin-dom of God.

Mary Coswin's Favourite Psalm

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff –  
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.  
–Psalm 23

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Mary Coswin, OSB, MA (Formative Spirituality) is a member of St. Benedict's Monastery and currently Director of St. Benedict's Retreat and Conference Centre.

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# A Reflection on Modern Psalms

JAYLENE JOHNSON

Image: [Geordanna Cordero](#)

I was a teenager when I first heard it, a song released several years earlier. As *Depeche Mode's* "Somebody" spun off of the cassette tape to my ears that first time, all I could do was sit there, still, with a lump in my throat. Rewind. Repeat. Rewind. Repeat. It resonated with my angst-filled heart. It was my song.

I've had other songs do this over the years. As a songwriter, part of the wonder and privilege of the craft is that special something about words set to music, which meets our deepest longings and gives voice to our most profound feelings. Not just any words, but those born out of raw, human experience, out of our most intimate vulnerabilities or personal pain. Words – lyrics – that become universal songs that connect us, open us, and heal us.

It's not surprising that the Psalms, sacred poems meant to be sung, are so often the "go to" when it comes to heart-matters, especially in our search for authentic expressions in worship. In them we find longing, grief, doubt, anger, comfort, celebration... the wide range of emotions we all experience. In them we find permission to shout, to ask "why" and "how long," to grieve and despair. The Psalms are, in fact, filled with complaints, but set in the overall context of hope in God's love and care for us – what God has done in the past, is doing presently, and will do in the future. The Psalms provide a safe space to say how we feel, whatever that is, because of God's ultimate character of love and grace.

The term "Modern Psalm" is an interesting one. I'm not sure I'm entirely comfortable using the term *psalm* outside of a biblical context. Equating a non-biblical lyric with scripture doesn't quite sit right with me. However, the Psalms have provided a blue print for corporate (sung) worship as it has evolved over the centuries. Every generation has set biblical Psalms to melodies relevant to their culture, and the Psalms have also inspired new lyrics; the same, universal sentiments are expressed, but in a contemporary way.

**A modern psalm is inclusive and invites participation. It may express a heart-cry born out of an individual experience, but in a way that is universally understood, and can engage a congregation or audience.**

This has been so effective at times that some have difficulty letting go of "their songs" to make way for the songs of a new generation. Once music connects with the heart, it's hard to let it go! I have seen this be true in church cultural and denominational contexts as well, where it is believed by a congregation (or a segment thereof) that "their way" of worshipping is "The Way." It can be quite damaging, actually. So, I think we need to be very cautious in labelling the songs we use for worship as "modern psalms." As inspired, as

sacred, and as important to us as a new song might be, it isn't scripture, and we do well to hold music in church with a humble and gracious hand.

All this said, if we use the term loosely, here are some personal thoughts about what kinds of songs might be considered "modern psalms" in contemporary worship.

Firstly, a modern psalm is musically and lyrically crafted to relate to today's culture (or to a church congregation's aesthetic culture), but remains rooted in the ancient and eternal truth of God's word. Because we are exploring a term that relates closely to scripture, being that music accesses the most vulnerable parts of ourselves and that our emotions are easily influenced by music, it's essential, in my view, that "sacred" music has theological integrity. If we challenge anything about songs in and for the Christian community, let it be that.

Secondly, a modern psalm is inclusive and invites participation. It may express a heart-cry born out of an individual experience, but in a way that is universally understood, and can engage a congregation or audience. Because the intention of a psalm is for the lyric to be sung, practical considerations like song form and the "singability" of the melody are very important. Even simply choosing the right key can make all of the difference as to whether or not a song becomes anyone else's. There is nothing quite like a congregation unified around a song – what an amazing sound! Conversely, nothing frustrates corporate worship quite like the music leader who is too precious about their "aesthetic," more focused on doing their song, their way, than they are interested in whether or not anyone else is actually singing along.

Thirdly, a modern psalm can be an intimate prayer and deeply personal, but should ultimately focus the attention on God and not on self. It seems to me that the reason why people, believers and non-believers alike, look to the Psalms, is that they offer hope, whatever the circumstances in an unfailing, unchanging God. Even laments, of which, in my opinion,

there need to be more written for congregations, are an opportunity to cry out to God, who is faithful, compassionate, and merciful.

Finally, a modern psalm reflects God's heart for justice. All throughout the Psalms (and elsewhere in the Bible), it is clear that this is God's heart. As Psalm 82:3–4 asks God to "Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (NIV), so might our "modern psalms" do the same. "The Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy" (Psalm 140:12, NIV), thus positive action toward a just world should characterize followers of Jesus. It follows that if "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1, NIV), we who "sing" our love for God should love and care for God's creation – people, animals, planet.

What God has done for any one of us is meant to be for all. It's not enough to have an intimate and emotional time of worship through music in church and not respond with lives that are attentive to God's heart. How might we worship leaders and songwriters create a musical context – modern psalms – to keep this pursuit "front of mind"? May all who offer music for the Church contribute songs that inspire authentic worship, invite participation, declare God's word and character, and encourage us to live how Jesus would have us live in the world.



Singer/songwriter Jaylene Johnson has released four studio albums, the most recent being *Potter & Clay*, produced by Signpost Music in Winnipeg. Her work has earned two Juno nominations, three Western Canadian Music Awards nominations, and several Covenant and International Songwriting Competition awards. Jaylene lives in Winnipeg with her wonderful husband and two miracle toddlers. For more information, please visit [www.jaylenejohnson.com](http://www.jaylenejohnson.com).



# Parish News Roundup

## Outreach at St. Mary's, Charleswood

We are a small parish in Charleswood with a big heart, proclaiming the goodness of God and the love of Jesus Christ. Our Mission and Outreach is a large part of this heart, as we nourish our neighbours.

We have a long connection with St. Matthews Maryland Community Ministry, and parishioners weekly share food and friendship at the drop-in. In recent years, we have also found ways to address food security by our heart-reach in Charleswood.

We are a partner agency of Winnipeg Harvest, holding a Food Bank in our Parish Hall every two weeks. The Charleswood Caring and Sharing Food Bank serves 40 households, with church and community volunteers organizing the food delivered by Harvest volunteers, and provide coffee, snacks, and support to guests when they attend the Food Bank. Two parishioners also offer clothes mending services those days to Food Bank guests needing minor repairs.

Another recent outreach project saw the redevelopment of underutilized space on church grounds for a community garden. Our Abundance Community Garden provides 10 plots to neighbourhood families, including refugees and newcomers. This offers access to garden fresh produce for gardeners. Our Sunday School children have done fundraising for additional fruit perennial plants. Last year, raspberry canes and grapevines were donated, and this year some blueberry bushes and strawberry plants were added to the garden. We have received numerous grants to help make this project possible.

Connections through our Food Bank also led us to a new partnership opportunity with

Family Dynamics. Their neighbourhood settlement worker acquired a grant from the Winnipeg Foundation to run the weekly sessions for six weeks in our area, and we provided the space for these Conversation Circles to take place. Refugee and newcomer mothers, especially, find it difficult to access language classes. This supported time together offered space to practice speaking English, with childcare provided.

Connecting through food programs has helped connect us with neighbours who reflect the rich diversity of backgrounds, cultures and faith traditions that make up our wider community. We see God's love at work in these connections. We see glimpses of the world as God intended, sharing with our neighbours.

– Marilyn Davis, People's Warden



This page of the Parish News Round Up is sponsored by Richard Rosin. For more information, see his ad on page 6.

## PWRDF

At General Synod in July 2019, a historic motion to create a self-determining Indigenous Church was passed. There was a general call for more education for reconciliation tools to support Settlers and Indigenous Canadians alike in learning more about truth and reconciliation.

PWRDF is poised to help fill the gap with Mapping the Ground We Stand On, an education for reconciliation tool first developed four years ago by staff from PWRDF and the Anglican Church of Canada to better explain the concept of *terra nullius* (empty land) and the Doctrine of Discovery in a tangible and physical way.

It has been presented to dozens of communities across Canada and the fourth edition of the Facilitator’s Guide will be printed in early 2020. But it will get an even greater boost. In June 2019, PWRDF brought nine volunteers from across Canada to Winnipeg to train them as facilitators.

Each of the four Ecclesiastical provinces has been equipped with a large floor map, a key component of the exercise and the facilitators are working together to share this resource. The nine facilitators are:

- **B.C./Yukon province** – Nancy and John Denham (Diocese of New Westminster) and Michael Shapcott (Diocese of Kootenay)
- **Rupert’s Land province** – Elizabeth Bonnett and Jennifer Marlor (Diocese of Rupert’s Land)
- **Ontario province** – Greg Smith (Diocese of Huron) and Cheryl Marek (Diocese of Toronto)
- **Canada province** – Gillian Power and Mike MacKenzie, (Diocese of Nova Scotia/PEI)

[Click here](#) to watch a video about the exercise and how it opens our eyes to Indigenous communities all around us.



## Rupert’s Land in the Media

Jamie Howison, rector of saint benedict’s table, was recently published in *The Living Church*, an Anglican magazine from the U.S. Jamie wrote about saint ben’s brief sojourn to Elim Chapel while All Saints’ underwent renovations over the summer.

Here’s an excerpt of the article, “Belonging to Our Place”:

“Interestingly, it was the acoustics we noticed first. It struck us immediately and deeply impacted the character of our worship. At All Saints, voices resound, filling the space, while music ensembles accompany the congregation. At Elim Chapel, musicians moved from ‘accompanying’ from the side to ‘leading’ from the front, relying on the high-quality PA system to compensate for muted voices and instrumental sounds.

....

We also felt the difference in the arrangement of the space. At Communion we were used to walking down the center aisle and gathering in circles around the Lord’s table. Now, with three aisles and angled pews, we had to negotiate a different way. Describing it as ‘awkward,’ one person noted ‘the laughter, wide eyes and shrugging shoulders’ as we fumbled our way into learning a new formation. One person also noted that, at All Saints, ‘one is conscious of intentionally deciding to step out and come forward to receive, then actually receiving with others,’ adding that, without gathering in a circle, this sense of risk and intimacy was hard to recapture.”

[Read the full article here.](#)



## Canadian Foodgrains Bank

Jim Cornelius, executive director of Canadian Foodgrains Bank, has won the Perinbam Innovation and Impact Award for his work to help end global hunger.



From the [Canadian Foodgrains Bank website](#):

"The award is presented to an individual and an organization each year by the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) and the World University Service of Canada (WUSC), in collaboration with the trustees of the Lewis Perinbam Award. Cornelius has won the individual's award for his work.

According to their website, CCIC defines an innovative practice as 'a new or more impactful means of, or approach to, addressing development challenges and improving the lives of the world's most vulnerable.'

'Jim's work demonstrates that Canadians are uniquely positioned in imagining new innovative and hopeful approaches to the wicked challenges that the world is facing,' says Jean-Marc Mangin, Chair of the Trustees of the Lewis Perinbam Award.

Throughout his 22 years as executive director, Cornelius has led various innovative approaches to the Foodgrains Bank's work of ending global hunger, including efforts to improve the efficiency of Canadian food aid.

Before 2005, 90 percent of money for Canadian food aid had to be spent on Canadian farm products. The hope was to support Canadian farm prices, by buying and shipping Canadian grain overseas, while helping feed the world. Food aid had a low impact on the Canadian agricultural market, though, and shipping grain was an inefficient way to respond to hunger. It often took too long to reach those in need, shipping food was expensive, it deprived local farmers of a market, and the food shipped from Canada – usually wheat –

was often not part of the local diet.

Cornelius led a successful lobbying effort of different Canadian stakeholders, including farmers and non-profit organizations, to convince the Canadian government to change the way it provides food aid. It's been over ten years since Canada began buying most of its food aid from local sources.

'Now people whose lives have been disrupted are receiving the emergency food they need to survive more quickly and efficiently,' says Cornelius.

– Shaylyn McMahon, *Communications Coordinator*.

## Quiet Day on March 28

Rev. Mother Elizabeth of the Sisters of St. John the Divine will be in Rupert's Land the weekend of March 27–29. She will lead a quiet day on Saturday March 28 at St. John's Cathedral at 9:00 a.m., followed by pot luck lunch. She will also preach at St. Luke's Parish on Sunday, March 29 at 10:30 a.m., followed by fellowship. All are welcome at these events.

## Education for Ministry

Education for Ministry Mentor Training will be held April 30 until May 2, 2020. To be a mentor, you must have completed at least two years of EfM or be ordained. A minimum of six, or a maximum of eight, places are available. Mentors must be trained annually. Please contact [Susan Roe-Finlay](#) if you wish to participate or need further information.



"Lenten Labyrinth" by Mike Moyers. "This painting is a visual labyrinth containing many Lenten concepts. The labyrinth begins and ends with the dark path at the bottom – representing Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Some other themes depicted are: covenant relationship, scripture, the Law, discipleship, betrayal, servant hood, readiness, patience, Christ's passion, deliverance, abundance, provision, sacrifice, new life, and love."



# Spiritual Gap Year Gives Women Space to Reflect

STUART MANN



One is a music therapist, recently graduated from Wilfrid Laurier University. The second is a spiritual director from Hong Kong. And the third, from Lethbridge, Alberta, is discerning a call to the religious life.

Three women from different backgrounds, but with one thing in common: they are all spending a year living and working at the Sisterhood of St. John the Divine's convent in Toronto.

Since 2016, the sisterhood's Companions on an Ancient Path program has offered a spiritual gap year to women over the age of 21. Fifteen women from across Canada and overseas have participated in the program, and applications are open for the 2020–2021 cohort.

"One of the real gifts of this program is that it opens up space in a woman's life to think, to experience, to create community, to deepen one's faith or maybe struggle with faith," says Shannon Frank-Epp, the program's assistant coordinator. "A lot of women come here and say, 'I don't know what I believe anymore.' And this is a safe space to go deeper."

While at the convent, participants – called *companions* – live, work, pray, and learn alongside the sisters. Their room and board is fully paid for by the sisterhood, a Canadian order that was founded in 1884. The sisterhood has received generous grants from the Diocese of Toronto's Our Faith-Our Hope campaign to fund the program.

Sr. Constance-Joanna Gefvert, coordinator of the program, says the gap year isn't a recruitment tool for the sisterhood, although a couple of companions have joined the order. "The purpose of it is to help women deepen their spiritual lives and have the tools they need to live a discerning Christian life and a life of discipleship," she says.

Companions need not be Anglican. Many have come from different denominations, including the Pentecostal and evangelical traditions. They have often been referred to the program by their parish priests, chaplains, or friends.

For Jasmine Lo, 25, the experience has grounded her in her faith and provided her with valuable work experience. A music therapist, Lo helps patients at St. John's Rehab, a hospital located next to the convent that was founded by the sisterhood and is now part of Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre.

"Being here, I feel really privileged," she says during an interview at the convent. "We have a sense of peace and a time to be open to God."

Halfway through the year, she says she has learned a lot about herself. "It has nurtured me. I've learned that it's important to just be myself, to be authentic in my therapy practice as well as my faith journey."

Born in Vancouver and raised in Hong Kong, she hopes to return to the former British colony to help those who have been traumatized by the ongoing protests and riots. But she's keeping an open mind. "This is a really interesting journey that I'm on and I look forward to where it is going," she says.

Florence Au, 55, says the pace of life at the convent is a world away from her busy life in Hong Kong. "It can be sort of hectic here, but in a nice way that grounds you. You aren't attached to work all the time, like you can be in your other life. Whatever you are doing here, you have to stop and go to prayer. God is at the centre of everything."

A spiritual director back home, she has also been able to apply her skills at St. John's Rehab and the convent's guesthouse, where people often stay for retreats. She says living alongside the sisters has been a unique opportunity.



Photo: Michael Hudson

**From left, Florence Au, Jasmine Lo, Shannon Frank-Epp, and Kelsea Willis in the library at St. John's Convent.**

"I can see God through the sisters," she says. "I can see how they age so gracefully and how wise they are and how they live with one another."

She encourages other middle-aged women to apply to the program: "You need to embrace change, whatever stage of life you're in. It's harder when you're older, but you have to try. Some things I don't want to change in my life, but it's good to be open to possibilities."

Kelsea Willis, 24, is on her second year in the program and is discerning a call to the religious life. "I was very comfortable with the sisters and they were comfortable with me," she says, recalling her first year. "It felt that I wasn't ready to go when the time came, that there was more to be explored here and more to do."

Before being accepted into the program, the native of Lethbridge, Alberta had quit her job and moved in with her mother. "I wasn't living the life I knew I wanted to live or the life I knew I should be living," she says. "I was feeling so disconnected from everything. I was looking for a community or something that would bring together the person I wanted to be and the values I wanted to live out, with the person who I was."

Her parish priest recommended the program to her. "He said, 'I think this would work for you.' It was in line with some discernment that I was going through at the time, but I didn't know how much fruit it would bear."

As it turns out, it would bear a lot. Willis beams as she describes her life at the convent. She is the sacristan at St. John's Rehab's chapel, assisting the chaplain, the Rev. Canon Joanne Davies, and also helps out in the convent's chapel. "I've really enjoyed living intentionally and always with the sisters, praying with them and being a member of the community. They are great women, and they are my friends now."

She encourages other women to give the program a try. "Go for it. If it feels right, you'll know. I've learned that if there's something you really want to do, and you feel that it's the right thing to do even though you have to change your entire life to do it, it's worth doing."

For more information about the Companions on an Ancient Path program, email [Sr. Constance Joanna Gefvert](mailto:Sr. Constance Joanna Gefvert) or visit [www.ssjd.ca](http://www.ssjd.ca).