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Finding Our Canadian Mission

By Gary Nelson

God is at work in Canada in unique ways. We need to find out how – and join in!

Gary Nelson's 45-minute presentation at the Hinge Conference (November 17, 2010) was called "Discovering Our Unique Canadian Voice: Thinking Missionally in Context." It is available free in video or audio (MP3) formats at the EFC.ca/hingesessions, along with a variety of other resources produced by the conference sponsor, The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

When asked how he sees God at work in churches across Canada, Nelson offers these initial observations:

- **Growing distrust for the quick fix.** Instead many see a need for ongoing co-operation. Many more see how local contextual expressions of church, taking shape in unique ways, are better than following a standardized model.
- **Distrust of overreactions to our past church experiences.** Nothing is worse than in-house reactions. They are never balanced and always pendulum swings.
- **Responses deeply rooted in practice and practitioners.** Canadians see action ("praxis") rather than theory as foundational. Young and old are willing to take a chance and see what God may be calling them to do.

The novelist Robertson Davies once commented, "Canadians are an insecure people, but one thing we are sure of, we are not Americans." Yes, it can be hard to understand how we are different from our neighbours, especially when we hear so many loud neighbourly voices in the media and elsewhere. But let's consider why we might need uniquely Canadian voices, particularly in the area of Christian ministry.

(1.) Canada isn't the USA. In the 1950s more people went to church in Canada per capita than in the United States. We were a church culture. To be sure, it was not the same public religion of our neighbours to the south, but we went to church. Then something happened. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, we just stopped. At first it was a trickle, but then it happened in droves. Canadians didn't slam the door when they left (except maybe for the so-called quiet revolution in Quebec). Canada just slipped out the side door and never came back. Most who left were more apathetic than angry. They discovered better things to do than church, leaving many of us who remained bewildered.

(2.) The Christian character of Canadian society was rooted mainly in the rural framework of our historical development. That has also changed dramatically. Now more than 90 per cent of all Canadians are urban dwellers. No matter how much we try to make subdivisions feel like small towns, the urban influence alters our values and sensibilities.

(3.) Today, although most Canadians say they believe in God, weekly church attendance is down to 16 per cent of the population, according to self-reported behaviour in a recent Ipsos Reid poll. Over 47 per cent of those polled believe "religion does more harm than good." My experience is Canadians are open to speaking about spirituality but extremely suspect of institutional religions such as Christianity.

(4.) We have moved in recent decades to a



Gary Nelson

time when the church no longer plays a role at the centre of society. Christianity has been pushed to the margins or even opposed with hostility. More and more Canadians have no church experience. They are not looking for cosmetic improvements to the way we do church – they have decided we are irrelevant.

(5.) Let's add one more item to this oversimplified list of what makes Canada unique. Canadians have long preferred the image of a "mosaic" rather than a "melting pot" in discussions about nation building. We acknowledge cultural challenges produced by the coming together of various narratives of meaning and values. This intercultural awareness, this multicultural pluralism, affects everything we do.

To minister effectively in our new context requires many of us to reorient the way we think and seek to be the church. Like the early church we must take the redemptive mission of God to the world, and find our identity not inside the walls of the church, but outside in the borderlands where faith, unfaith and other faiths intersect.

To those avid missional thinkers, this is not news. They have been encouraging us to remember Christians are people on a mission – God's mission. This God who sends His Son to the world calls the church to that same purpose – and at Pentecost flings it out. This mission did not first involve forming committees and constitutions but being a people of the Good News both in word and deed.

Reimagining the church in the borderlands is to realize we are not *taking* God there. He is *already* there. Our task is to find out where God is at work and join with His activity. **FT**

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