

# INCARNATING THE URBAN CHRIST: THE ROLE OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD CHAPLAIN

*THIS PAPER IS DEDICATED TO CAL AND CRISSY  
KRAHN, DANIEL PERRON AND VIOLAINE PARADIS,  
WHOSE MINISTRY AND PERSONS WERE THE  
INSPIRATION FOR ITS CREATION.*

## INTRODUCTION

At the moment of writing this, Montreal and the province of Quebec are in an “in-betweenness” season. The Covid-19 pandemic has turned our city on its head, like so many urban centres across the world. The Church has not been sheltered from the anxious throes from the existential crisis in which so many institutions and movements find themselves. As churches struggle with questions as broad as what is their mission in the 21st century and as concrete (and angst-filled) as what to expect in terms of Sunday morning attendance, there is a real need to look at the vocation and posture of any community of faith as it moves into the next uncertain phase of its life.

As we navigate new spaces and meaning in the world of gathering, spiritual encounters and lived expressions of faith in the city, so must we pay attention to those persons and roles who are helping re-situate the Church, as a community in mission, free to love its city and seek its peace with the Gospel of Jesus(1).

Christian Direction is an urban ministry that seeks the incarnational manner, method and message of Jesus Christ in all of its formations and initiatives. In this paper, we have attempted to design a contextualized portrait of chaplaincy for our urban neighbourhoods according to our understanding of incarnational urban ministry.

## **A NEIGHBOURHOOD CHAPLAIN: JESUS IN THE MARGINS**

Neighbourhood chaplaincy is a spiritual ministry which takes place on the margins of mainstream, organized, or institutional life. Chaplains, now increasingly called spiritual care providers (2), occupy a space on the margins. This differentiates them from a pastor or a priest who stands at the pulpit or altar. The pastor or priest is a symbol of centralized worship, much like the church building is a symbol of organized religion. Of course, the clergy have a broader job description than leading Sunday services! But the above is a description of societal perception.

When we are referring to Christian chaplaincy, this spiritual care giver professes a faith in the saving person of Jesus Christ and seeks to give care according to Christ's incarnational presence. This is not to say that a Christian chaplain cannot give pastoral care to someone of another religion, or a person who affiliates with no religion. Quite the opposite.

A good chaplain learns to relate and care for the person in front of them according to their needs, background and personality.

In Montreal, as in so many urban centres in the 21st century, it would be wrong to assume that the person standing in front of you is a Christ follower, or even acquainted with the Christian story. The Christian chaplain embraces this reality and learns to thrive in this context, even though their point of theological reference and model of care starts in the person and message of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the hermeneutic (meaning, we will read chaplaincy according to how Christ played the role of chaplain. His method, manner and message is how we will define and imagine 21st century neighbourhood chaplaincy). Jesus didn't stay confined to his most familiar spaces or minister uniquely to his comfort zone (neither his religious, familial or cultural circles). By his crossing of boundaries, as we will see in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus lays the blueprint for a neighbourhood chaplain's in both a call to kenosis and a missional method and manner.

The chaplain navigates the liminal; a third space. They "transgress another space between orthodoxy and secular space." (3)



**Stories from the street:  
A portrait of Violaine**

*Violaine is an agente de pastorale-sociale (a “social pastor”), which means one of her roles within the Catholic Diocese is to bring the church closer to the community work taking place in the east end of Montreal. You can regularly find her on social media or on her youtube channel where she advocates for the rights of the most vulnerable in Hochelaga or is spotlighting one of the many social services in the neighbourhood of which she is obviously well acquainted with.*

*An ordained sister with the Congregation de Notre Dame (founded by Marguerite Bourgeois in 1658) Violaine lives near those she ministers to, visiting her low-income and elderly neighbours, taking note of those whose living conditions are inadequate and mobilising local services to come to their aid. She also led a series of Covid-adapted Christian gatherings in the neighbourhood during the pandemic, including a candlelight vigil for the neighbours who had passed away.*

*During the lockdown of January 2022, the Cathedral downtown opted to hold Mass outside. Violaine drove her neighbours to and from church and geared them up with blankets and knee pads. This innovative approach to religious gathering during Pandemic garnered a rave response from local media, and Violaine was in the centrefold of the newspaper.*

**Stories from the street:  
A portrait of Daniel**

*Daniel is on the pastoral team of Hochma, a Mennonite church in the east-end neighbourhood of Hochelaga. In response to the rise in homelessness in Hochelaga, the church founded a non-profit organization, Care Montreal. Daniel’s strengths in logistics made him an obvious candidate to coordinate the dispatch services of Care Montreal, organizing the transport of hundreds of unhoused Montrealers to overnight shelters and health care centres every day.*

*But Daniel is much more than a gifted manager.*

*He walks the streets of Hochelaga every day, talking with his unhoused neighbours and checking in on them.*

*He is an active member of “Les Artisans de Paix”, a small network of engaged Christians who pray for their neighbourhood and organize creative spiritual gatherings, such as prayer walks or caroling services.*

*During a prayer gathering, he once stated, in all humility, “I know the name of every homeless person in Hochelaga.”*

In other words, they bring the presence of the sacred into common life, those places and situations where the institutional church is not always present, or not always invited into. Regardless of space or position, the Christian chaplain seeks to incarnate Christ's message of salvation, justice, wholeness and care.

The points of commonality between a chaplain's work in marginalized spaces and Jesus' ministry are clear. Much like the person of Jesus, the chaplain is themselves a person who navigates on the margins or is drawn to those people who find themselves in these spaces. Jesus spent time at the temple, and occupied occasional roles in this institution.

However, the stories of Jesus sitting, walking, communing, leading and teaching outside of religious traditional worship spaces far outnumber the ones spent within the walls or boundaries of mainstream religious life. Jesus spent time in conversation and debate with institutional leaders, but he also spent considerable, arguably more, time with persons found on the margins. In today's culture, some of these persons are viewed by mainstream culture as voiceless or nonessential.

Others are simply not accustomed to being in relationship with someone who binds together the broken ties of sacred and secular life.

Chaplains are associated with religion and spiritual life, but they are something of "other". They don't hold institutional power. Their work in the third space can actually build trust with those who would not instinctively trust organized religion. "If chaplains became less marginal their work might be more controversial, disputed and scrutinised. Part of the continuing acceptability of chaplaincy may depend on its perceived powerlessness."<sup>(4)</sup>



## **His method, manner and message: Jesus as chaplain to the Samaritan woman at the well (5)**

Our reading of this story in John 4: 4-30 often puts most of its attention onto the “Water of Life” discourse, and for the remarkable fact that Jesus gave this discourse to an outcast of the social order: a woman from Samaria, five times married, and therefore marginalized among a people who are already considered lowly by their Jewish counterparts. In a way, it lays the blueprint for Jesus’ salvific message: He is the water of life - all people, not just the Jews, may drink from his eternal water - once transformed, like the Samaritan woman, the converted person may preach the good news of salvation to their neighbours. A reading of this story through the lens of chaplaincy, as described in the section above, may reveal even more layers of border-crossing in the method, manner and message of Jesus Christ.

It is worth our attention to look at the time and space elements in this story. Jesus chooses a non-mainstream place (Samaria), a margined location (the well, which would be the gathering place for women, not for men) and an unpopular time (noon, as opposed to morning). In other words, Jesus chaplains the Samaritan woman by functioning in the liminal. This is his method. He would have had no chance of sharing his salvation with this woman had he remained at the temple, as her gender and race would have prohibited any access to him within that space.

Of equal importance is Jesus’ manner of engaging with his conversation partner (this is also the longest recorded one-on-one conversation with Jesus in the New Testament). Teresa Okure observes, “Once he begins the dialogue, the woman takes the lead, and at each point Jesus uses her concerns (of water-fetching, marital life, and the right place to worship) to reveal to her his true identity and convey to her the gift he offers.”(6) His kenotic manner, first in asking her for water, and then in relying on her to lead the topics of conversation “liberates the receiver”(7), in this case the woman, and gives her full agency to draw from her experience, ancestral history and personal knowledge. These points of contact are at her initiation, but become Jesus’ material for crafting her sacred encounter with her Messiah.

His manner of chaplaincy is perhaps at its epitome when he draws out the Samaritan woman's story of pain. Her present marital status, regardless of how she got there (8) is likely an issue of shame. In a simple statement, Jesus reveals he knew all along about her situation and she replies with astonishment, "you must be a prophet!" In this story, his chaplaincy manner is not a posture of condemnation but rather of true seeing. This is his prophetic nature: he sees, he names. Thus his encounter with her is all the more meaningful - he had deemed it worth his time to speak with her, in spite of, or perhaps because of, her story of pain.

Finally, his message again is intrinsically linked to borderlessness. Christ's living water will give eternal life to whoever asks (v.14) regardless of ancestry, geography or status. While this pericope in John begins in a description of time (noon) and place (Sychar, in Samaria), it concludes with a reflection on time and place. "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." (v.21) This living water message goes to the heart of the chaplain's role: to bring Christ to those found neither in Jerusalem nor on the mountain. Jesus' last words in this exchange, after having truly seen the Samaritan woman for all that she is, allows her then to fully see him, "I- the one you are speaking of - I am he." The full borderlessness is concluded with full revelation.

## **UNDERSTANDING ONE'S CONTEXT: SEEING, DOING AND BEING (9)**

Many are familiar with prison chaplains, hospital chaplains, chaplains in the military, or even in the locker rooms of sports teams. The neighbourhood itself is also a valid space of bridging the sacred and the secular, just as is the case of an emergency room or a military compound.

In this, the neighbourhood chaplain is intrinsically linked to geography and people. Much like the hospital chaplain becomes accustomed to the people, the space, the mechanisms of operations, the vocabulary and the working culture of the hospital, the neighbourhood chaplain will make it their mission to understand and intimately know their neighbourhood. They will learn the story behind geography and over time understand the wounds of the neighbourhood, the faces of those most vulnerable, but also have a firm grasp of the hopes, joys and strengths of their communities.

Chaplains intentionally seek out the regular faces and the stakeholders: local business owners, city officials, and fellow clergy. They will make themselves available to residents and neighbours by creating a consistent presence at reference or

landmark points of the neighbourhood.

While this may seem like a lofty vision or high reaching goals, it is actually quite simple. The portraits given throughout this paper are of people who have a deep understanding of their vocation as urban chaplains and who live it out in relatively simple terms: through the daily goings on of their urban environment, they offer their presence to a set place and people group, building a ministry of longevity and proximity, of committed enthusiasm to their geography.

They do this in clear and uncomplicated ways: adopting local community services through volunteerism or partnership, checking in on neighbours, befriending and supporting local businesses, creating rituals and religious gatherings according to their faith traditions, communicating the Christian faith through appropriate and relevant means and rejoicing in their neighbourhood's beauty and successes. What we are advocating here is for an approach that imitates Jesus' way of seeing, being and doing.

## **MONTREAL: CITY OF AFFECTION, CITY OF SHATTERED TRUST**

Montreal, located in the province of Quebec, holds a rich and complex religious history, primarily associated with Roman Catholicism. The province still reports a unique relationship to belief and religious practice: “From 2017 to 2019, Quebec was distinguished from the other provinces because it had the highest proportion of people who simultaneously reported having a religious affiliation and who considered their religious or spiritual beliefs not very important or not important at all to how they live their lives (40%, compared with proportions ranging from 15% to 25% in the other provinces). Quebec also had the lowest proportion of people participating in group religious activities at least once a month (14%, compared with 21% to 32% in the other provinces).” (10)

The history and present day perceptions of the Christian religion require for the ambassadors of explicit expressions of Christian faith to strike the delicate balance of affectionate familiarity and shattered trust. Affectionate familiarity, in that they must embody the known and the nostalgic: the trusted and friendly

parish vicars, the monastic religious workers who healed, taught and fed. The kind and constant prayers of the faithful grandmother, the passion and fervour of the labour movement supported by social justice priests, voices for liberation theology.

Shattered trust, in that they must not only acknowledge but also seek to be an incarnational reparation of the sins associated with the historical church in Quebec: the control and corruption of the institutional Catholic church who refused communion to women who stopped having a baby every year. The still lingering trauma of the residential schools. The unethical bonds of the church and state in the 1950s. The physical abuse suffered by thousands of orphans at the hands of nuns and priests.

Our city carries within itself the wounds and the triumphs of its religious past. Our beautiful Cathedrals draw admiration and reverence but their cardinals have yet to fully repent and pay reparations to the Indigenous people for their role in residential schools or the abuse of generations



of children. Our storytelling, through novels and film making, hold memories of the goodness of faithful clergy and yet the emancipation of the masses from their religious identity during the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s was likely one of the most important actions the people of Quebec ever did in terms of self-determination.

The chaplain, in representing the liminal, can pay homage to this story of self-determination while still offering the safety and care of a spiritual shepherd. As we saw with Swift, Cobb and Todd's reflections on the chaplain, the perceived powerlessness of this role is what builds trust with those who would otherwise regard institutional religion as tainted or suspicious. The humility that results in the marginalized role of chaplaincy could actually begin to repair broken relationships with our religious past. Being aware of the mistrust, the broken ties, the bad memories must inform the chaplaincy approach.

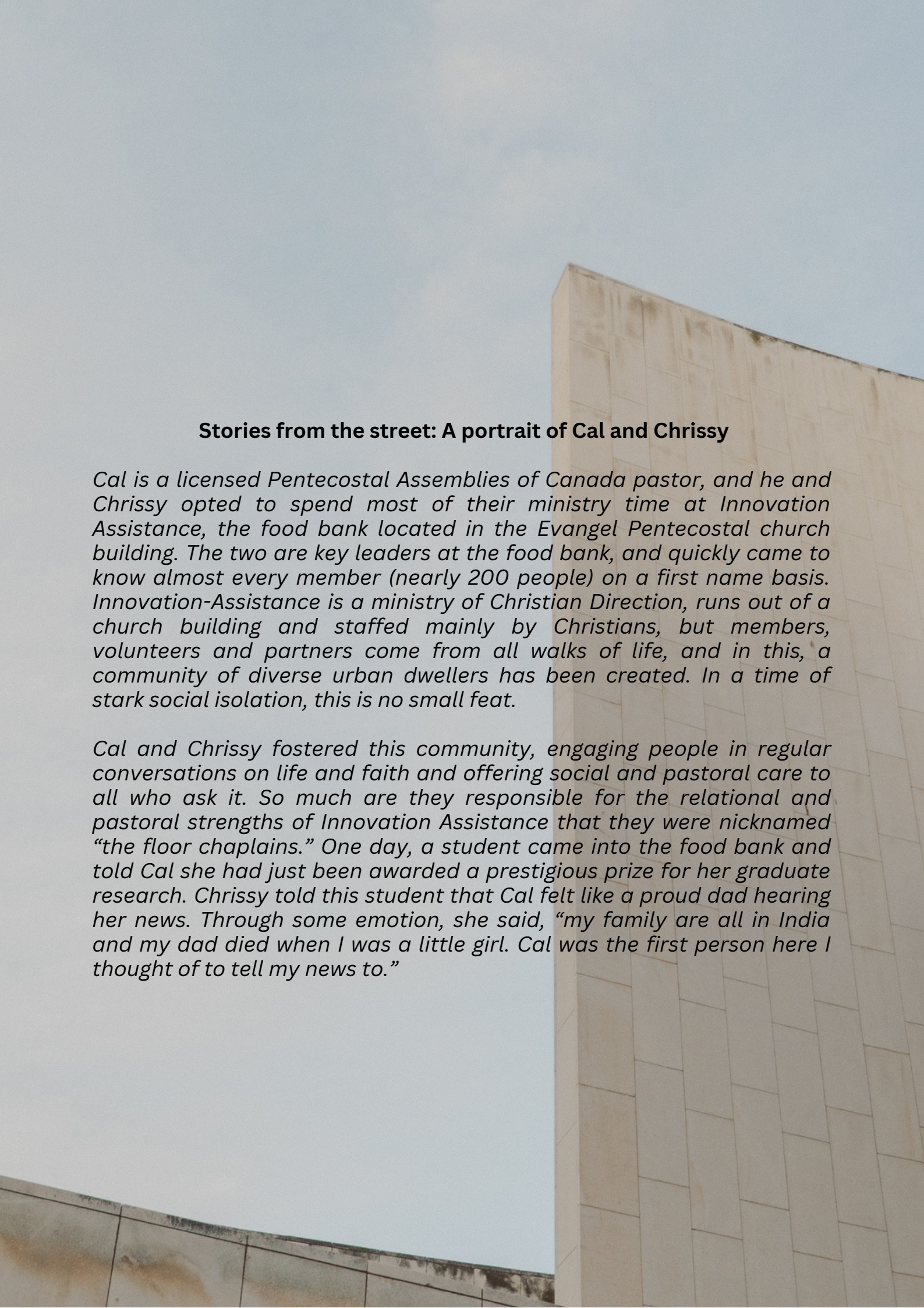
## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Montreal is an urban centre in which much of its peoples and social imagination has departed from the institutional church.

This does not mean that incarnating the presence of Jesus through his message, manner and method is outside of the reach of mission and ministry.

In fact, the liminal space in which the chaplain navigates may be one of the healthiest extensions of the established church, one in which the minister can foster trust and familiarity, becoming the true and honest shepherd.

It is our hope that more people will respond to the cry of the urban soul, which seems to have a timeless tone: a plea for authenticity and a request for care.



## **Stories from the street: A portrait of Cal and Chrissy**

*Cal is a licensed Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada pastor, and he and Chrissy opted to spend most of their ministry time at Innovation Assistance, the food bank located in the Evangel Pentecostal church building. The two are key leaders at the food bank, and quickly came to know almost every member (nearly 200 people) on a first name basis. Innovation-Assistance is a ministry of Christian Direction, runs out of a church building and staffed mainly by Christians, but members, volunteers and partners come from all walks of life, and in this, a community of diverse urban dwellers has been created. In a time of stark social isolation, this is no small feat.*

*Cal and Chrissy fostered this community, engaging people in regular conversations on life and faith and offering social and pastoral care to all who ask it. So much are they responsible for the relational and pastoral strengths of Innovation Assistance that they were nicknamed “the floor chaplains.” One day, a student came into the food bank and told Cal she had just been awarded a prestigious prize for her graduate research. Chrissy told this student that Cal felt like a proud dad hearing her news. Through some emotion, she said, “my family are all in India and my dad died when I was a little girl. Cal was the first person here I thought of to tell my news to.”*



# What does a neighbourhood chaplain do? (11)

The neighbourhood chaplain:

- Commits to following the person of Jesus and caring for one's community in the method, manner, and message of His person.
- Commits to living a life in the Holy Spirit, from which they have the resources to serve others.
- Commits to the non-judgemental work of incarnational presence by humbly accompanying people of all or no religion.
- Commits to understanding and loving their neighbourhood, its context and story.
- Actively seeks out the places and people where God's spirit is already at work and commits to celebrating and supporting this work.
- Offers pastoral counselling and mentoring. Listens, holds space for emotions, laments, tears, pain and struggle.
- Connects with people of the community, including residents, workers, business owners, civic servants and front-line workers.
- Seeks out the hard places in the neighbourhood and commits to a ministry of presence and prayer for those living in the margins.
- Acts as a representative of ecclesiastical life in various public spheres such as community councils, neighbourhood committees or volunteerism.
- Provides support through volunteerism with organizations serving those on the margins.
- Provides spaces or leads activities for spiritual growth such as Alpha groups, bible studies, recovery groups, conversation evenings, according to the chaplain's Christian tradition, strengths and areas of interest.
- Develops and co-creates liturgies, ceremonies, prayers, celebrations, - gatherings of any kind. Serves as a resource for spiritual, inspirational and relevant material for remembering, centering and grounding.
- De-escalates, mediates and provides relational support during times of emotional intensity.

# Notes

1. Street Psalms, “Thriving Congregations”, 2021,  
<https://www.flipsnack.com/streetpsalms/practicing-peace-overview/full-view.html>
2. Cage and Skaggs, “Chaplaincy? Spiritual Care? Innovation? A Case Statement”, Brandeis University, 2018  
<https://chaplaincyinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Cadge-Skaggs-2018.pdf>  
Note: Cage and Skraggs write that Chaplaincy has evolved into “a practice of care involving the intentional recognition and articulation of the sacred by nominated individuals authorized for this task in secular situations.”
3. Swift, Cobb and Todd, *A handbook of Chaplaincy Studies: Understanding Spiritual Care in Public Places*, Routledge, 2016, p.100.
4. Swift, Cobb and Todd, *A handbook of Chaplaincy Studies: Understanding Spiritual Care in Public Places*, Routledge, 2016, p.100.
5. The method, manner and message is an application from the framework found in ROCKE, Kris and VAN DYKE, Joel, 2017. *Incarnational Training Framework: A Training Guide for Developing Incarnational Leaders Engaged in City Transformation*, Street Psalms Press, p.56-90.
6. Okure, Teresa, “Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:1-42) in Africa”, *Theological Studies* 70 (2009), p.414.
7. Idem.
8. While former readings have labelled the Samaritan woman as adulterous or sexually promiscuous, a more critical and socio-historical understanding of the text indicates that women had little to no power over their choice of husband, and certainly no woman would have been able of leaving and marrying five different times. The fact that she fetched water herself and didn’t send a servant indicates she is not rich and therefore her divorcing and remarrying of her own free will was even less likely. The text doesn’t explain the particulars of her situation but a possible scenario was that she was married as a young girl, widowed, and then passed on from brother to brother according to levitical practice. The latest partner, to whom she is not legally married, may have been a relation who simply saved her from destitution, and would not even give her the honour of marital status. It is interesting to note that Jesus does not end his encounter with her with his famous “go now and sin no more” that he said to the adulterous woman in John 8 or to the crippled man in John 5. Rather, he ends with the full revelation of himself, “I- the one you are speaking of - I am he.” (For more on a critical-historical reading of the Samaritan woman’s sexual immorality see Okure p.408 or Reeder, Caryn, “Revisiting the Woman at the Well” in *Intervarsity Women Scholars and Professionals*, May 27th 2014 (<https://thewell.intervarsity.org/in-focus/revisiting-woman-well>) [last consulted on October 3rd 2022].
9. Original content available in: ROCKE, Kris and VAN DYKE, Joel, 2017. *Incarnational Training Framework: A Training Guide for Developing Incarnational Leaders Engaged in City Transformation*, Street Psalms Press, p.56-90.
10. Cornelissen, Louis, “Religiosity in Canada and its evolution from 1985 to 2019.”,  
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00010-eng.htm>], October 28th, 2021.
11. This list is inspired by “Daring Compassion: The Role of Movement Chaplaincy in Social Change”, by Faith Matters Network, 2019.  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f25c8fe4b0014b3798ea58/t/5c8c0b7beef1a118610368bb/1552681852398/Daring+Compassion+Overview+%281%29.pdf>]